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THE AVENGERS®

IN A NOVEL BY DAVID MICHELINIE

THE MAN WHO STOLE TOMORROW

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THE MAN WHO STOLE TOMORROW

IRON MAN:
The Armored Crusader!
THOR:
The Mighty God of Thunder!
THE VISION:
The Sensational Synthezoid!
THE BEAST:
The Bludgeoning Blue-Furred Berserker!
QUICKSILVER:
The World's Fastest Being!
THE SCARLET WITCH:
The Mysterious Mistress of the Hex!

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The Very Heavens Trembled . . .

The door shattered, cracking into fist-sized pieces and exploding inward as Iron Man and Thor crashed through. Pressing against the door, Quicksilver, the Vision, and the Scarlet Witch also tumbled inside in a rain of gray dust and skittering rubble.

The Beast, however, was not so fortunate. He had also been leaning against the door, but when the resistance had ceased and he had begun to fall backward, the ice block on his head—the ice block that contained a helpless friend and colleague—had tilted forward. Almost as much from instinct as thought, the Beast reached out as he fell, grabbing hold of the block and twisting, hurling the massive weight back into the obelisk. It was only then that he realized that he had pushed himself *out* of that structure, and that the lemon colored bridge had completely retracted.

THE MAN WHO STOLE TOMORROW

BY
DAVID MICHELINIE

Packaged and edited by
Len Wein and Marv Wolfman

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For my parents:
Lanelle, Jimmy and Ila

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One

No one noticed that the old man cast two shadows. But then, on midwinter Manhattan sidewalks still spotted with residue from the season’s frequent ice and snow storms, few people bothered to notice anything but where next to push their swiftly shuffling, Totes-booted feet. It had been a bleak December, and the reality of a rapidly approaching Christmas, complete with prices that cried for punch lines and crowded stores that smelled as much of body odor as holly and pine, did little to sharpen the sensitivities of the scurrying New Yorkers. They had problems of their own, and none bothered to share even a fragment of his closely guarded attention with the tattered old man on the corner.

The old man repaid the favor—he didn’t notice them. In fact, his eyes seemed fixed, like unblinking, dirt-brown buttons stuck in the deeply grooved, red-bronze crust of his face. “An American Indian,” an observer would likely have guessed upon seeing that face, had there been an observer. And, indeed, the low-hung necklace of golf-ball-sized

gemstones that could occasionally be glimpsed beneath his wind-whipped clothing seemed to add to that image. But this was no desert-bred native American, for the parka he wore was fashioned of thin, unlined animal hide, and even then he seemed uncomfortably warm when the winter wind gusted, sending a fresh squall of icicle-crisp air to bother the hats of the grumbling passersby.

The old man smiled, a gray-toothed grin that was not altogether unkind, and his head bobbed slightly with anticipation. For he had traveled a continent and a decade to stand on this oh-so-special street corner and now, as one thin, time-dried hand crept to the gemstones about his neck, he knew that the object of that journey was close by, held in the sprawling stone building directly across the street from him. It was a most impressive structure, settled securely as it was behind a strong brick wall and ornate iron gateway, sporting three stories of dark carved granite, high-vaulted windows and a majesty no architect had ever scrawled on a blueprint. To the tax assessors at City Hall, it was listed as an alternate residence for cosmopolitan industrialist, Anthony Stark; while to millions of Manhattanites, it was Avengers Mansion, home of the Earth's mightiest superheroes.

But the old man on the corner with the bark-brown eyes and the cracked gray grin and the oddly shaped shadow knew it for what it really was: a shrine.

And, should unfortunate circumstance require—a *tomb!*

"Terrific! We just finish saving the whole world from a marauding bunch of chrome-plated cockroaches, and we get stopped by the elevator in our own headquarters. God help us if the tabloids ever get hold of this!"

Hank McCoy was hanging upside down by his feet from the lighting fixture in the ceiling of the elevator; under normal circumstances, a situation that would undoubtedly

prove alarming to his fellow passengers. However, the other six individuals crowding the confines of the stalled lift were, themselves, far from the norm. For along with the dangling Mr. McCoy, they constituted the world's greatest fighting team, the Avengers. And the Avengers had long since grown used to the idiosyncrasies of their fellow comrades-at-arms.

Case in point: no one ever questioned the fact that Hank McCoy seemed more comfortable hanging from chandeliers than sitting on chaise longues, that he eschewed taxi rides in favor of swinging, apelike, from street lamp to street lamp over chronically snarled city traffic. Of course, the elementary observation that the gentleman's entire body was covered with silky, dark blue fur and that his appearance, mannerisms and reflexes were more simian than human helped that acceptance considerably. In fact, for many it was far easier to accept Hank McCoy as what he was now than as what he had once been: a brilliant, world-renowned scientist who, caught in a freak laboratory accident, had mutated into the nimble, wisecracking hero known to the general populace as simply . . . the Beast.

On the floor below, a tall, crimson-skinned Avenger turned to address the Beast, moving with a precision more machinelike than human. For, indeed, as a synthezoid construct, the Vision possessed characteristics of both. Many considered that a most unsettling combination.

"Actually, Beast," began the Vision, with electronic tones as cold and hard as the ice on the streets outside, "the Darvinians were structured more along the lines of the phylum *Formicidae.* And their protective coating analyzed as a polymolybdenum compound, rather than common chrome."

"Sheesh! I try to cheer everyone up with my endearing boyish wit and the only response I get is Mr. Wizard here with an entomology lesson! Hey, Iron Man, when are you

going to get us out of here? I don’t think my fragile ego can take much more.”

Crouched in one corner of the elevator in front of the exposed circuitry of a recently opened control panel, the armor-clad leader of the Avengers glanced up. “Shouldn’t be long now, Beast. I’ve traced the problem to a shorted-out wire, and I’ll have it all patched up in a jiffy.”

Turning back to the exposed wiring, Iron Man sent a mental command through one of the cybernetic electrodes touching his skull inside his helmet. Instantly, literally with the speed of thought, the command flashed through his sophisticated, metal-mesh armor, causing a tiny aperture at the end of one crimson-gauntleted finger to iris open. Then, responding to a second unspoken command, a needle-thin beam of coherent light shot from the finger receptacle, focusing on a pair of insulation-trimmed wires inside the control panel. *Got to be careful,* thought Iron Man. *If I don’t keep the laser’s intensity within very fine tolerances, I could burn a hole clear through the entire control mechanism!*

Behind Iron Man, five Avengers watched patiently: the Beast, swinging casually to and fro; the Vision, whose pupilless black eyes showed signs of neither life nor death; Captain America, the resurrected red-white-and-blue warrior of World War II; Wanda Frank, the beautiful and aloof European woman called the Scarlet Witch; and Thor, the massively built, blond-tressed hammer bearer whom no one dared dispute as being the living Norse god of thunder.

However, one less stolid Avenger also watched—a silver-haired, silver-garbed mutant known, for his speed as well as appearance, as Quicksilver. Born Pietro Frank, he was brother to the Scarlet Witch, and though he shared much of his sister’s pride and noble bearing, he had allowed her the bulk of the family forbearance. Now, as was too frequently the case, his patience was fast running out.

“Come, come, Iron Man. We’ve better things to do than stand around in this sweaty chamber all day. Why don’t you just use your repulsor rays and blast us an entrance to the floor below?”

“Somehow, Pietro,” answered Iron Man, “I don’t think Mr. Stark would appreciate that. He does own this place, you know, and we’re already over budget for repairs this month.”

“Bah! If Stark really cared about expenses, he would indulge in a bit more preventive maintenance, so that things like this wouldn’t happen! I wonder how penny-conscious that irresponsible playboy would be if *he* had to do the repairs you’re doing?”

Beneath the solemn mask of his helmet, the man in the metal-mesh armor smiled. Unbeknownst to the other Avengers, he *was* Tony Stark! Having years ago invented the incredible microcircuitry that gave his unique armor its multitude of powers, he had later created the entity of “Iron Man” in order to utilize it. He had even put Iron Man on the payroll of Stark International as his bodyguard, so as to completely separate his adventurous escapades as a super-hero from the much-needed haven of his private life, the relatively sedate world of big business. Apparently, he had succeeded.

Placing a hand lightly on Quicksilver’s shoulder, Captain America stepped—or more accurately, squeezed—forward.

“Just take it easy, Pietro. We’re all tired and a bit on edge. We may not like it, but the problem’s a simple one and all we can do about it is wait.”

“That is correct.” The sepulchral, measured tones of the Vision fairly echoed off the elevator walls. “Protest in the face of logic serves little purpose. We are in no danger, and this chamber holds sufficient air to provide life support for the probable duration of our detention here.”

“Oh, really?” Eyes narrowing, Quicksilver turned to face the solemn synthezoid. “How very, very comforting that is, coming from something that doesn’t even *breathe!* Next thing, you’ll be breaking out a case of thirty-weight oil and telling us we’ve sufficient nourishment as well!”

“Pietro!” The Scarlet Witch’s sharp tone reflected the tension that had crept suddenly into the close air of the elevator. “Please, this isn’t the time or place—!”

“It is ever the time and place, dear sister, to decry impropriety. I’ve opposed the membership of this walking computer ever since he first came to us. He’s a machine, nothing more; and it galls me to see you all affording him the respect and concern due a real, flesh-and-blood being.

“How can we trust him? How can we depend on him? Why, he could malfunction, blow a tube, just when we need him the most. Just like this damn-fool conveyance we’re trapped in now!”

During Pietro’s entire outburst, the Vision had stood unmoving. He continued to do so now, fixing Quicksilver with eyes as dark and deep as a moonless night.

“I cannot help but wonder, mutant, if your anger is truly directed at my reliability, or at your own shame . . . for allowing your sister to *marry* this ‘mere machine.’ ”

The tension had grown, drawing the paneled walls of the elevator closer together, filling the forms and hearts and minds of the seven people stranded there. It was a tension thick with violent potential, yet brittle as paper-thin glass. And thus it was almost surprising when the Vision’s next, carefully chosen words broke only the awkward silence.

“I have caused embarrassment; that is regrettable. But I fear that walking computers are seldom programmed for social amenities. Now, if you will excuse me . . . ?”

So saying, the Vision began to change, his green-and-yellow costume fading, his crimson skin growing pale. As a

synthetic being, he had complete control over his entire physiology, down to the very molecules of which he was composed. It was within the scope of his power to alter the density of those molecules, and that was exactly what he was doing now. His entire body was rarifying, keeping form but growing dim, almost totally transparent, until at last, he had gained an ethereal, almost unreal quality. It was then that he began to sink.

His body was now less dense than the floor of the elevator, and he began to drop through that floor, descending slowly, like a weight falling through thick oil. In seconds, the Vision was gone, leaving no mark on the carved tile floor to indicate what he had done, or even that he had ever been there at all.

“Jesus!” The Beast now clung with all fours to his ceiling perch, staring down at the recently vacated section of the elevator floor. “I wish the Vizh would stick to doors and windows like the rest of us. He gives me the willies every time he pulls that stunt!”

“Aye,” added Thor, gripping his mystic mallet, Mjolnir, a little tighter. “ ’Tis enow to strike frost to the heart of e’en a Thunder God!”

“Well, we’ll all be warming ourselves in front of a crackling hearth soon, Thor,” said Iron Man, rising. “The patch-up’s all finished and we’re back in business.” As if to illustrate his point, he touched a pressure-sensitive disk on the replaced control panel and the repaired elevator obediently, if abruptly, resumed its downward journey.

“Main floor, ladies and gents,” called the Beast. “Sporting goods, household wares, and for those shoppers who’ve just finished saving a world, a handy selection of industrial-strength aspirin!”

The Beast’s joviality helped to somewhat ease the strained atmosphere within the elevator, but it was only when the lift’s doors opened onto the wide, plushly

decorated main hallway of Avengers Mansion that relief washed over the six exiting heroes like a comforting tide. It was a feeling shared by the slight, dignified man who awaited them there.

“Master Iron Man! Oh, thank heavens you and the others are all right!”

The man’s name was Jarvis, and from his formal attire and noble bearing he could easily have been mistaken for a diplomat, or possibly one of the more successful wizards of Wall Street. And indeed, his education and recorded IQ would have qualified him for either of those rather lofty situations. However, his temperament and family history had led him, some thirty years before, to seek a position of service. Thus he had spent the last dozen or so of those years serving as butler to the Earth’s mightiest heroes—and the Avengers’ own mothers would have been hard-pressed to show them more loyalty.

“I was beginning to worry. When the warning monitor indicated a malfunction in the primary lift, I was afraid someone might have been hurt. I was about to call an emergency repair service when—”

“Thank goodness you didn’t,” interrupted the Beast, climbing nimbly to the top of a nearby hat rack. “J. Jonah Jameson keeps a reporter stationed in the coffee shop across the street twenty-four hours a day. If he’d seen a repair truck pull up, we’d be all over the front page of the *Daily Bugle’s* evening edition!”

Iron Man chuckled. “Don’t worry, Beast. Your stalwart image remains untarnished. And your concern is appreciated, Jarvis, as always. Were there any messages while we were gone?”

“Why, yes, sir. A network executive phoned, inquiring as to the availability of Master Thor for an appearance on the *Tonight Show.* He said that it was in regards to a special episode concerning modern heroes, and asked that I

mention that they had already signed John Glenn, Henry Kissinger and some chap named Christopher Reed, or Reeves, or something like that.

“Oh, and there were a number of calls for Master Beast from young ladies. Nine, I believe.”

“Aw, geez!” A furry palm slapped an even furrier forehead. “I forgot the weekend was coming up. Decisions, decisions.”

“Well, you’d better make your return calls fast, Don Juan.” The amusement in Iron Man’s voice was now tinged with a familiar ring of authority. “I’m calling a debriefing session as soon as we’ve caught our second wind. We need to record the details of the Darvinian incident while they’re still fresh in our minds.

“I’ll see you all in the first-floor lounge in five minutes.”

“Futz,” murmured the Beast under his breath. Then, springing agilely from the hat rack, he bounded down the hallway toward his private quarters, caroming occasionally off a convenient wall and singing, “La-dum-da-dum-da-dee, a hero’s life for me . . . !”

Somewhat less enthusiastically, the other, bone-tired Avengers dispersed, each hoping to grab a quick shower or cup of coffee before the necessary debriefing.

Meanwhile outside, the old man with the anticipating eyes stepped from the curb into the street.

“Please, darling, don’t hold it inside. I’m your wife, remember? We’re supposed to share things.”

The blinds were still partially drawn in the large room Wanda Frank and the Vision had shared since their marriage some years before, and only pencil-thin beams of weak winter light filtered in through the slats. The electric lamps had not been lit, and the inadequate natural illumination barely served to define the elegant lines of the stately Victorian decor against the darker shadows of the room. The

Scarlet Witch stood stiffly, fingers laced before her, and watched how the light made patterns on the red, synthetic flesh of her husband's face.

"I hold nothing from you, Wanda—there is nothing to hold. We were both aware of your brother's feelings at the beginning, just as we are aware that they have not changed. I accept that."

"I know, darling, but . . . sometimes it's so difficult to tell if you're just being kind, or if you really understand."

"Understand?"

The slender woman reached out, one scarlet-gloved hand lighting gently on the Vision's forearm.

"About Pietro. He doesn't really mean to be cruel. It's just that ever since we were orphaned as children, and outcast because of our supernormal powers, he's been so terribly protective of me. It's almost as though his sole purpose in life has been being my big brother.

"I'm sure he would resent anyone I joined with, feeling them a threat to his protective role. The fact that you're . . . what you are only gives him a focal point for that jealousy."

"How foolish." An electronic ring still edged the Vision's words, but now there was a warmth there as well—a warmth that translated into tenderness as his strong hands encircled his wife's slender waist and pulled her close. "Though I suppose it is very human for jealousy to be involved. After all . . . we do both love the same woman."

Soft brown eyes looked into jet-black hollows, as the Vision's head canted, lowering slowly. Lips met: hers, moist and yielding, parting slightly; his, smooth and supple, pressing harder as neural sensors picked up his wife's quickening heartbeat. The kiss was natural, unhurried, ending only when Wanda pulled away with a small, reluctant sigh, and a resigned smile that curled one corner of her mouth.

“We, uh, only have a few minutes before that debriefing, darling. Maybe we shouldn’t . . . ?”

“Have you forgotten, Wanda,” the Vision’s voice now held almost a hint of amusement, “that there are certain advantages to being a machine?”

Wanda’s smile opened coyly, revealing an inviting line of small, white teeth, as the two partners joined hands and turned from the window.

“Hey, Wanda, your tiara’s on crooked.”

“What? Oh, uh, thank you, Beast.”

Inside the metal shell of his armor, Tony Stark watched the last two members of his team enter the high-ceilinged lounge, the Scarlet Witch taking a seat, in one of the low-slung contemporary chairs while the Vision took up a position behind her, both a calculated distance from the scowling Quicksilver. They were late, though not very, and while Captain America would probably have lectured them on the importance of tactical punctuality and military regimen, Tony Stark’s attitudes were somewhat more liberal.

For he had been with the Avengers since their inception, when—as Iron Man—he had banded together with Thor, Ant-Man, the Wasp, and the Incredible Hulk to battle the menace of the renegade Asgardian, Loki. Since that time, nearly two dozen heroes and heroines had called themselves Avengers, and each one—including, in an abstract sense, the Vision—had shared a common trait: human fallibility. It was a difficult job, leading such a talented and powerful band while at the same time considering the needs and frailties of each member as an individual. It was also a tremendous responsibility.

But it was an even greater honor.

“All right, Beast, if you’ll turn off the pong game and join us, I think we’re ready to begin.”

“Aw, shucks. And I was winning, too!” Reluctantly, the furry mutant shut off the video game he had been playing with Jarvis and bounded to where the others had gathered at the head of the room. Jarvis excused himself to fetch refreshments.

Satisfied that everyone’s attention was now suitably directed, Iron Man turned to the computer console recessed into the wall behind him and flipped a switch, activating the mechanism’s built-in recording sensor.

“As usual, I’ll give the basic details of the mission for our formal files, and then the rest of you can add your own personal observations afterward. Okay?”

There were general nods and mumbles of agreement.

“Right,” continued Iron Man, angling himself slightly toward the computer grid. “Avengers mission designation B-419: the Darvinian invasion. On the morning of December 14th of this year, an inter-dimensional takeover was attempted by an insectoid race of aliens known as the Darvinians. The purpose of this invasion was to secure a breeding ground for—”

A thunderous crash snapped Iron Man’s sentence in two as the entire rear wall of the lounge came bursting suddenly inward. Caught in the full, buffeting force of the blast, those Avengers who had been standing were slammed instantly to the floor, while those who had been seated were sent tumbling, banging awkwardly into walls, furniture, and each other. Of the seven, only the Beast landed on his feet.

“What the hell was—”

But the Beast’s question faded swiftly, ending in a startled gurgle at the back of his throat, as he saw the unlikely answer to that question stepping carefully through the jagged hole that had appeared in the rear of the mansion. An answer whose eyes and hands were aglow with

impossible crackles of arcane energy. An answer whose frail form wore two shadows.

It was the old man.

“You who are in league with the wing-footed defiler, hear me well!” Words like razored ice, clattering from the lips of the dead. “Stand aside, lest I mete out the retribution you so justly deserve!” A step taken, shoulders hunched. “My quest has been long, my pain great, and I shall brook no interference in the completion of my sacred task! For I am Aningan Kenojuak, and I have come,” a single hand raised, like a poising snake, “to retrieve . . . *god!*”

Two

The dust refused to settle. Every time it would light amongst the scattered rubble on the lushly carpeted floor of the lounge, a new breeze would gust from the hole in the outer wall, sending a fresh flurry of motes to dance like random vapors in the rapidly cooling air.

The Avengers, however, were somewhat less animate. Struggling slowly, sometimes painfully, to rise from where they had fallen, they could but stare silently at the old man with the tattered parka and the necklace of shiny stones—and the chill they felt was more than a whim of the harsh winter wind.

Captain America, using a partly overturned trophy case for support, eased himself up and into a side-angled crouch. Ever the efficient soldier, he had quietly slipped the red-white-and-blue shield from its carrying position on his back and, in a motion made smooth by familiarity, now held it before him, toward the old man. He was the first to speak.

“God? The only god here is Thor. Got any idea what he means, Goldilocks?”

“Nay. I have ne’er cast eyes ’pon yon venerable mortal in all mine unnumbered years!”

“Nevertheless,” Iron Man had now regained his feet, “you’d better let us handle this until we find out what’s going on. God or no god, this character’s obviously no run-of-the-mill senior citizen. He could be dangerous even to you.”

“Oh, pshaw,” said the Beast, clambering forward on knuckles and heels, “that old coot’s just got some kind of burr under his saddle. Let me give it a try.”

“Careful, Beast,” called Iron Man, reaching out a hand, “that ‘old coot’ just blasted a hole in a solid stone wall!”

“Picky, picky. Just look at that face. How could anyone with a mug like that be dangerous? Weird, yeah, and he’s got some freaky powers, but I’ll bet he’s just mixed up, maybe even looking for help.

“Hey, pop, what’s the problem? Someone cop your oatmeal?”

Aningan Kenojuak looked unsure, touching one hand to his necklace. “You . . . you don’t seem evil. But you’re one of them! So, please. Stay back. I don’t want to hurt you, but if I must—!”

“Now, now,” the Beast had approached the old man, slowing, until he stood directly before him, addressing him with a silly Cheshire-cat smile. “No one wants to hurt anyone, pop. So why don’t you just come with me, huh? We’ll go into the kitchen, have a cookie, talk over the latest medicaid rip-off and—”

“No!”

The Beast had put a hand on the old man’s shoulder—or rather, had tried to—because inches from their goal, the furry fingers had stopped, as if touching something that

wasn’t there. And then that something *was* there: an aura of translucent, yellowish green energy that covered Aningan Kenojuak like a thick second skin. It had obviously been there all along, an invisible protector awaiting a summons.

Then, almost in the same instant as it had appeared, the energy fluxed, brightening and booming like muted thunder—and, not incidentally, sending the startled Beast rocketing across the room as if shot from a cannon. The Beast tensed—“Aw, no.”—hit a row of bookcases with a sound like a falling redwood and then dropped heavily to the floor, an unmoving ball of tousled blue fur.

The oddest part of the entire occurrence was the sadness on the face of the man in the yellow-green glow.

“I . . . I warned him.”

“Aye, varlet, and now I warn thee!” Thor stepped forward, his enchanted hammer half raised to a striking position, his face set in grim, hard lines. “Thou speakest of gods—and thou wouldst be well counseled to make peace with thine own!”

“Thor! No!” Iron Man gestured, knowing that physical restraint against the angered Thunder God would have been futile. “You’re the old man’s target, remember? He could be leading you into—”

“Fie! Yon villain hath struck down a comrade; moreover, a friend! And none shall pursue such base sport with impunity! Not whilst the son of Odin doth have one strong arm with which to fling the mighty Mjolnir!”

With that, Thor raised his arm to full cock and, snapping it forward like a fly fisherman’s rod, let loose his mystic mallet. Across the room it flew, an enchanted length of stone and wood that in its time had shattered steel, cracked planets and brought power-mad demigods trembling to their knees.

When it struck the old man, it bounced off him.

Making a sound not unlike the reverberative *ping* of a sonar unit, the sorcerous hammer arced back a few feet toward its owner, then dipped sharply, returning as ever to its master's hand.

" 'Od's blood!" A note of puzzlement had crept into Thor's voice. "In sooth, I did but seek to stun our attacker—yet at the least, my throw should have sent him tumbling! 'Tis witchcraft of the darkest sort!"

"Perhaps," the Scarlet Witch added, "but it's unlike any I've ever encountered!"

"Whatever it is," said Iron Man, "it gives that old codger a hell of a wallop. The rest of you stand back—I'm going to see if he can handle a double repulsor blast."

Repulsors. To most people, the term conjured up images of ray beams, zap guns or, most erroneously, "those laser gizmos that Iron Man uses." But repulsors were more than mere lasers—far more.

Born in the steaming caldron of Southeast Asia in the 1960s—in the same fires that had birthed Iron Man, himself—repulsors had begun life as an advanced experiment in reverse magnetism, their intended purpose being to repel, or repulse, any object. The mechanism had later been incorporated into Iron Man's segmented gauntlets by the inventor of both—Tony Stark—and over the years, the repulsors had undergone countless alterations, refinements, and improvements. At last they had mutated into their present form, that of the most powerful particle-beam-emission units ever conceived by the mind of man.

Iron Man stalked forward a few steps, set his feet, and purposefully raised both hands before him, holding them at arm's length, palms vertical. Then, never taking his eyes from his energy-auraed target, he triggered cybernetic release circuits, sending twin shafts of devastating power to strike square at the intruder's chest.

The old man didn’t move.

Good lord, thought Iron Man, *what’s this guy made of? That blast would have sent a Metro bus flying for blocks! Maybe if I double the intensity . . .*

He did, and was rewarded by several beads of sweat that popped out on Aningan Kenojuak’s forehead as the palm-mounted repulsors began to whine.

So, he can be hurt! Got to key in my reserve circuits, hit this joker with everything I’ve got . . . try to break down his energy shield before he can pull some other surprise out of his hat!

Around the room, the other Avengers watched—some uneasy at following the noninterference order; all a little impressed. For they had rarely seen their leader unleash the full force of the technological might at his command. Their leader rarely had cause to do so.

Meanwhile, the object of that impressive onslaught was sweating more profusely, his protective aura crackling brightly at some points, dimming at others. He took a shallow step backward, and then clasped both hands to the gemstone-laden line about his neck.

“The Totem warned that you would be guileful, that you would feign confusion and kindness and then attack without mercy. Just as he told that you had corrupted the All-Highest, debased him into serving as one of your cohorts, and it disgusts me to see that this is so.

“But I am not helpless. I have come with the strength of the righteous, for the Blue Totem has blessed me with Brother Bear and the String Of Stones, and has instructed me in their use. And thus all of your power and perfidy cannot stay me from abrogating your degradous sins!”

“Iron Man,” Captain America whispered, having come to stand beside his armored compatriot, “just what the blazes is he talking about?”

“Beats me, Cap. And to be perfectly honest, what worries me more is the fact that the effects of my repulsors seem to be lessening!”

Indeed, Aningan Kenojuak was now standing erect, all trace of perspiration gone from his brow. His head had snapped back, as if from a blow, and his eyes were closed, while his mouth opened and shut in sporadic cadence, mumbling words in an unsettling, chantlike monotone.

“Come to me, O Brother Bear,
Child of Negafok and Sedna,
’Cross the fierce and raging Koyukuk,
O’er the heaven-touched Talkeetnas.
Hear my sorrow, feel my anger,
Come to me, O Brother Bear.”

Over and over, the singsong recitation tumbled from flaccid lips, as the already-chilled room grew even colder. Something was about to happen, something unnatural, and everyone sensed it. In the blink of an eye, Quicksilver stood beside his sister, slightly to her front. At Wanda’s other side, the Vision noted that appearance, but said nothing.

A short distance away, Iron Man had ceased his repulsor attack, realizing that it was now futile, for the yellow-green glow around the old man had deepened, thickened, growing so dark as to make the form inside it nearly invisible.

And then the glow began to move.

Like a bilious, unhealthy cloud, it floated to the center of the battlefield/lounge, leaving Aningan Kenojuak behind, shoulders slumped but otherwise looking much as he had when he had first approached Avengers Mansion. Similar, that is, but for one salient difference: the old man now had but one shadow.

The second shadow belonged to the entity now manifest in the darkling glow. In the center of the debris-laden room, that entity now grew, lightening, taking form. It first extended its substance downward, creating legs for itself, and then spread high toward the ceiling, flowing like oily light, sprouting arms and a head.

And then, like a movie-projector beam being racked into focus, it solidified.

The most closely accurate human term that could be applied to the creature would be “polar bear.” Although that mode of description could be likened to calling Peter Benchley’s man-eating Great White a “fish.” For this unlikely animal stood a full twelve feet tall, and weighed easily half a ton. Its sinewy form was covered with thick, matted fur, slick as if greased, and its head held eyes that were an empty, solid white. Below those eyes, a dreadful slash of mouth opened in a perpetual snarl, exposing double rows of jagged, needle-tip teeth. And the monster’s entire body, from hind paws to sloping head, was bathed in the same sickly green glow that had covered Aningan Kenojuak.

The six Avengers stood silently, disbelieving, blood pumping madly through dilated veins.

“Now, Brother Bear,” called the old man, his head still bowed slightly, but his eyes alive, *“punish* the blasphemers!”

And with a low, grumbling growl, Brother Bear lumbered forward, moving with an ease that belied his considerable bulk. Directly in the creature’s path, Iron Man stiffened, instinctively bringing his arms up to fire another blast of recoilless repulsor energy.

He would have been equally effective shooting spit-balls at a Mack truck.

Brother Bear merely shrugged off the hissing repulsor blasts, ignoring them as he brought one heavy paw up to

head level—any higher would have put it through the ceiling—and then swung it earthward again, slamming the meaty mass down on Iron Man's head and sending the Golden Avenger crashing through the carpet-covered wood of the lounge floor. There, wedged solidly half in and half out of the room, the nearly indestructible armor showed no sign of damage. The unmoving man inside that metal shell, however, was not so fortunate.

Captain America, being the soldier that he always was, stepped in instantly to fill the shoes of command. "We've got to take that animal out fast! Thor, try a frontal attack! Vision, Scarlet Witch, back him up! And don't pull your punches—that thing may have just killed Iron Man!"

Moving with a precision polished by years of life-or-death teamwork, the three Avengers pressed forward. In the lead, Thor had taken to the air, the mighty Mjolnir carrying him at a modest height and speed dictated by the closeness of the quarters. The Scarlet Witch and the Vision fanned out, approaching Brother Bear from either side.

"Thou hast stricken down the noblest of our number, craven beast!" Thor now hovered directly before the glowing bear-thing, mallet gripped firmly in hand. "And for that I shall not stay my hand as I did with yon elder. Nay, thy soulless form shall feel the full, unfettered fury of the hammer of Thor!"

With that, the Thunder God swung, bringing Mjolnir around in a singing arc to strike the fur-matted demon a blow that would shatter a mountain. A mountain, perhaps, but not Brother Bear. For when the mystic hammer landed, it struck neither flesh nor fur, but instead lodged firmly in the yellow-green glow.

Obviously astounded, Thor tugged at the hammer, pulling it slowly from the protective field as if from thick, bile-colored molasses. So intent was he at this task that he didn't notice Brother Bear's paw rising once more, pulling

back in a deadly curve. He could hardly help but notice, however, when that same paw came smashing into his temple, spinning his head around with a force that would have snapped a mortal's neck—if, indeed, it had left the head attached at all.

For a frozen heartbeat, Thor hung motionless in the air. And then, loosening his grip on the now useless Mjolnir, he fell promptly to the floor, eyelids lowered, landing with an undistinguished thump. Almost as an afterthought, Brother Bear reached up and swatted the leather-thonged hammer, sending it bouncing across the carpet to some far corner, there to be forgotten.

For yet a second frozen heartbeat, the remaining Avengers stood staring; Thor was the mightiest among them, and yet there he lay like a crumpled doll, felled by a single blow from the impossible apparition that towered before them, snorting loudly and rocking from left to right, right to left.

It was then, with a voice as deep and solemn as doom itself, that the Vision spoke.

"You are strong, monster. But you will soon learn that strength has many variations!"

The Vision lunged, his right arm and hand extended, directed at the giant bear's midsection. But scant millimeters before his fingers made contact with the outer edge of the creature's glow, his entire hand and forearm paled, desolidifying, much as his entire body had done in the elevator a half hour before. So instead of touching the protective field, the Vision's hand went *through* it, through the outer layer of fur and into the mass of the monster's flesh, stopping only when it was buried to the elbow in Brother Bear's green-sheathed torso.

It was a ploy he had used sparingly in the past. Once his immaterial arm was deep into the substance of his enemy—be that target living tissue or mechanical construct—he

would instantly increase his density, compacting and becoming ultrasolid. As a result, the normal molecules surrounding his superdense limb would be disrupted, usually to such a degree that his foe would explode from within. Needless to say, it was a tactic reserved only for the direst of circumstances.

But the fact that three of his comrades had been swiftly—and apparently easily—dispatched had convinced the Vision that this was just such a circumstance. And so, setting his hand in a fist, the synthezoid willed his molecules to intensify, to grow harder, denser, until at last he had attained such tremendous weight that the oaken support beams beneath the lounge floor began to creak in protest.

But the expected explosion never came. And instead of the familiar look of calm confidence on his face, the Vision's features had contorted into a most uncharacteristic expression of surprise.

"It . . . it isn't . . ." he began, but was silenced by acrid smoke filling his mouth and nostrils, sooty vapors that poured forth in billows laced with guttering sparks. His internal organs were in turmoil, at war with one another. In a simpler machine, the condition would have been referred to as a "short circuit"; had he been able, the Vision would have called his own situation "spontaneous dysfunction." But whatever the terminology, the results were the same: the Vision sagged—knees buckling, head lolling back—and crumpled to the floor in a red-green-and-yellow heap.

"You . . . *you . . . FIEND!"* That such a relatively mild oath was all that hissed from the Scarlet Witch's clenched teeth was a tribute to her enviable composure. For more than anyone else, she knew the Vision; she knew his dignity, his hidden tenderness. She knew his soul. Thus, she had more than average perception of the broken, melting pain that Brother Bear had just inflicted upon him.

And that made her rage!

With cold purpose, she raised her hands before her, left out farther than right, elbows bent, bringing the middle two fingers of each down to their palms, clasping them there with her thumbs. As a mutant, Wanda Frank had been born with the ability to alter probabilities; as an adult woman, she had been taught true witchcraft by the elderly sorceress, Agatha Harkness. In this instance, facing an obviously occult conjuration, she opted for the latter, as wavering spheres of arcane energy formed around her extended hands. The spheres brightened, growing in intensity until crackling hex bolts shot from each like twin spears of light. Naturally, considering the range, they struck the hulking bear-thing dead center.

And just as naturally, considering the previous assault attempts, they had no effect whatsoever.

Instead, the mystic bolts turned back upon themselves, as if having struck some rock-hard mirror, and sped back along their original paths of flight. Having neither the time nor the concentration to cast a spell of protection, the startled Scarlet Witch was caught in the full force of her own hex blast, as a wreath of crimson magic engulfed her, seeping into her very core. Wracked with violent spasms, Wanda Frank doubled over, dropping to her knees, her eyes rolled up in their sockets and spittle trickled unchecked from her trembling, half-parted lips.

A fraction of a second later, Quicksilver was beside his sister, kneeling and taking her quivering shoulders in his hands.

“Wanda! *Wanda!”*

“Easy, Quicksilver.” Captain America sprinted across the lounge to join his friends, ever keeping an eye on the slowly advancing Brother Bear. “Just take it easy.”

“Like hell I will! When some hirsute monstrosity turns *your* sister into a frothing vegetable, Captain, *then* you can tell me to take it easy!” Quicksilver had risen to a half crouch,

tensing. “But right now I’m going to send that lumbering fiend back to whatever godforsaken limbo it came from! I’ll hit it so fast that it won’t even see me, let alone—”

Captain America shot out a hand to grab Quicksilver’s arm. “Damn it, Pietro! If you can’t follow orders, then at least open your thick skull for a minute and listen to reason! That ‘lumbering fiend’ has already taken out five Avengers—including Thor and Iron Man—and hasn’t even worked up a sweat! Trying to drop it by ourselves isn’t going to do anyone any good, including Wanda! We do still have a chance, but only if we use our heads!”

Some of the built-up tension eased from Quicksilver’s crouch, but his eyes still blazed anger as he looked at the Avenging Patriot. “Very well, Captain. I’m listening.”

“All right.” Cap’s hand dropped from Quicksilver’s arm. “I’ve been watching Kenojuak all through this skirmish, and every time his bear creature has acted, the old man has been touching one or more of those gems around his neck, just as he did when the monster appeared. It’s my guess that that necklace is the source of his power, and I’m betting that if we destroy it, his green gorilla there will pop out like a soap bubble. Are you with me?”

Reluctantly, Quicksilver nodded. “It seems a sensible plan.”

“Good. There here’s the strategy: I’m going to distract Kenojuak long enough to keep him from siccing his snaggle-toothed watchdog on us. Then, while his attention’s on me, you rush in at superspeed, grab that necklace and smash it against anything hard enough to turn it into splinters. Got it?”

Without waiting for a reply, Captain America flipped his shield to a horizontal position, reaching over its top to grab the far edge, holding it like an oversized discus. Then, cocking his arm back, he took a single turn and sent the shield zinging through the air with a trajectory as straight as

a drill sergeant's spine. The shield hit a far wall, caromed off at right angles to fly across the room and then hit again on what remained of the outer wall behind the old man. Taking a second bounce, the circular missile arced directly toward the back of Aningan Kenojuak's head. It was then that Captain America barked a single command:

"Now!"

Quicksilver's reflexes caught the word, translating it instantly into action, and before his heart could pump a single stroke he had crossed nearly the entire thirty feet that had separated him from the old man, having made a slight detour around Brother Bear on the way. Moving with a speed almost equal to that of thought, he closed the final distance, his hand reaching for the glittering necklace.

It was a prize he was not to have.

For at the same time that Quicksilver had started to run, Aningan Kenojuak had also started to move—and at a velocity that surpassed even that of the Silver Speedster! Without turning, he had reached a hand behind his head, catching Captain America's careening shield like a poorly tossed Frisbee, and had pulled it around to hold in front of him. So that in place of the desired handful of stones, Quicksilver got instead a faceful of adamantium alloy, hitting with a resounding *PATANG* and crumpling like a used-up tinfoil puppet.

Three combatants remained standing, and the air between them was strained with wariness and fatigue. Captain America stared at the old man, even as the old man stared at Captain America. Brother Bear snarled and spat and shuffled from foot to foot. At last, the old man spoke.

"Brother Bear," said Aningan Kenojuak, his voice now tinged with more than a hint of sorrow, "be gentle."

With that, a half ton of fur, claw, and fury shambled forward. Captain America knew that anything he did would

be futile, but it had never been his nature to shake hands with Death and welcome it to his door. And so he lashed out with a karate roundhouse kick, a move that had proven devastating from the sands of Iwo Jima to the gutters of Hell's Kitchen. A move that was totally ignored by Brother Bear.

In an almost casual gesture, the twelve-foot demon scooped Captain America up, bringing both arms around to crush the struggling Avenger to his chest with a pressure that could literally, if ludicrously, be called a bear hug. It was over in a matter of seconds. And then Brother Bear held the limp red-white-and-blue figure a foot or so over the floor and let it drop in what must have been, for him, the epitomé of motherlike tenderness.

"You have done well, Brother Bear," the old man spoke softly. "The sins of these profane few, though still indefensible, have been assuaged. Yet there remains one further task for you to perform. The wing-footed stealer of gods must be punished! For it was his impious actions that caused the Great Sorrow, and it is only his chastisement that can appease our Lord.

"So go! You know where to find the winged one—and what must be done when you arrive there!"

With a snort that could have indicated agreement, or possibly just the clearing of a nostril, Brother Bear turned and clambered slowly though the broken wall and into the winter-cold air of the city.

Meanwhile, back in the first-floor lounge of Avengers Mansion, Aningan Kenojuak padded forward to one of the fallen heroes, then lowered himself to one knee, his hands clasped in a mood of reverence. He smiled.

"At last and forever. My Lord, we are together."

Then the old man reached one hand to the sacred String Of Stones around his neck, and both he and the unmoving

Avenger were washed in a warm, pink light, like a sunset mist that flowed, and swelled, and ebbed. And when it was gone, so were they—leaving behind a battlefield scattered with rubble, splintered furniture, and six very, very still bodies.

Interlude

Once upon a time, in the legendary land of Manhattan, there was a police officer named Franklin Kim. It is told that Officer Kim was not a terribly imaginative man. In fact, he was well-known to the other officers on the force as a man who stuck stubbornly to the accepted laws of logic, who followed without compromise the established paths of probability.

He was also known as something of a dork.

Nevertheless, he believed in reality, and anything that deviated from that norm upset him no end. Even at home, he was constantly at odds with his children, Eddie and Frank, Jr. They were always watching space shows on TV, or reading too many of those trashy comic books. It just wasn't healthy.

"But, Daddy," Eddie would whine, precocious for his age, "fantasy is good for you. It helps you understand people who aren't like you, and opens your mind to things that might happen. It helps you grow."

“Bull,” was Franklin’s standard reply. “Now get rid o’ that funny book an’ hop inta bed before I whap yer fanny.”

It was a limited philosophy, true; but it made up for its limitations by being simple and easy to remember. And because his outlook was quite probably one of the prime reasons why, after twelve years on the force, Officer Kim was still pounding a beat, he saw no reason to alter his principles or point of view.

Of course, all that changed when he saw the giant, yellow-green polar bear trudging slowly down the dock toward the East River.

At first, Franklin Kim just looked at the creature. He knew it was really there—he’d had twenty-twenty vision all his life. But *why* for Christ’s sake was it there? Instinctively, he reached for his walkie-talkie—then stopped. Just what was he going to tell the dispatch chief, anyway? “Hey, Gordie, there’s a puke-green polar bear, maybe ten to fifteen feet tall, truckin’ down the East Side docks! Get some black-and-whites down here on the double!” No, he couldn’t say that. Why, that would sound downright silly! But then, what else could one do about a ten- to fifteen-foot-tall puke-green polar bear?

Reality answered: Franklin Kim removed his service pistol from the holster at his hip.

But in bringing the heavy Colt revolver to bear on his target, Officer Kim hesitated. This glowing, crud-colored monstrosity was not your everyday midtown mugger. And so he quickly upended the pistol, unlatched the cylinder and ejected the round nosed, department-issue cartridges to the pavement. Then, reaching under his heavy uniform coat, he unsnapped a leather case on his belt, removing a speed-loader reloading device charged with six Glaser Safety Slugs. The slugs were illegal as hell, even outlawed by the department, but half the cops Franklin knew carried them as

spares. After all, it was better to be a little reprimanded than a little dead.

With smooth precision, Officer Kim fitted the loader to the cylinder, twisted its release knob to drop the fresh cartridges into their chambers, and then flipped the cylinder shut. The Safety Slugs weren't really bullets in the literal sense. They were, in fact, actually composed of a thin copper sheath covering a heavy load of number twelve birdshot suspended in liquid Teflon. When the slug hit, the sheath peeled back and allowed the birdshot to penetrate a target at its original velocity. A coroner Franklin knew, on examining a safety slug wound, had described it as being roughly similar to opening the chest cavity, inserting a .410 shotgun barrel about an inch and then pulling the trigger. It was little wonder that the slug's manufacturer guaranteed them as "one-shot kills."

Six "one-shot kills" later, Officer Franklin Kim watched with open mouth and unblinking eyes as the slick-furred, yellow-green polar beer dived effortlessly if also somewhat gracelessly, into the ice-cluttered waters of the East River. Then, holstering his empty revolver, he began to walk casually back down the dock, taking in a deep breath and releasing it slowly. In the days to come, Officer Kim would not quit the force. He would not begin to drink heavily. He would not seek therapy.

But he sure as hell would start listening to his kids!

Three

“Er, Master Iron Man? Is everything all right?”

Jarvis stood in the hallway outside of the first-floor lounge, a scowl of protective worry on his face. He was used to loud noises issuing from the Avengers’ debriefing sessions, and realized that it was most often the result of the Beast being his acrobatic self, or else one of the others letting off steam after a grueling mission. But the sounds he had heard moments ago had been different, almost as though they were caused by mindless destruction—or by mortal combat.

If the door wasn’t opened soon, he thought, he’d have to go against every rule of professional service and enter uninvited. He cringed slightly at the prospect and rapped on the door once again.

“Sirs? Madam? Are you—”

The heavy oaken door swung inward on well-oiled hinges, revealing a figure covered almost as much by plaster dust as by disheveled blue fur.

“Wha—Master Beast! Wh-What happened? Are you all right?”

“Sure, Jarv. It’s nothing a couple of months in intensive care couldn’t clear right up!”

The door opened wider, and the startled Jarvis could see that inside the room various Avengers were getting slowly to their feet, massaging a wide array of bruises, cuts, and twisted muscles. The lounge itself looked as though it had played host to its own private hurricane.

“Oh, my. Oh, my, *my!”*

“My sentiments exactly, Jarv,” added the Beast. “Look, we Avengers can take a lot of punishment, but it might be a good idea if you fetched the first-aid kit—the *big* one—anyway. Oh, and you might bring a pot of coffee while you’re at it, along with the sewing kit. I’ve got a feeling some costumes are going to be needing on-the-spot repairs.”

“Yes, sir. Very good, sir.” His outward calm restored, Jarvis turned and walked methodically back down the hallway, while behind him, the Beast returned to the lounge, regretting that he had forgotten to request some medicinal brandy.

A short distance away, the Scarlet Witch sat back on her calves amidst the rubble, palms touched gently to her lowered forehead, eyes open and blinking. The Vision, lips and nostrils still traced slightly with soot, had come to kneel beside her, placing a hand on the curve of her shoulder.

“My wife! Are you hurt? Is there pain?”

“No, darling,” Wanda Frank’s voice was a bit weaker than normal, but steady. “I seem to be . . . all right now. I guess I’m just not used to taking . . . a dose of my own medicine. But . . . but you—!”

“You should not worry about me, Wanda,” answered the Vision, his fingers moving in a soft circle at the base of his wife’s neck. “My components are self-repairing, within reason. And I was more inconvenienced than harmed by—”

“Wanda!”

The single word had begun more than twenty feet away, and had ended mere inches from their ears as Quicksilver skidded to a halt before them, absently wiping at a crust of half-dried blood that had trickled from his nose.

“Are you all right? When I saw that hex blast hit you, I thought surely you were . . . but never mind that. I’ll call you a doctor!”

“That will not be necessary,” the Vision interjected. “Wanda’s cardiovascular functions are unstrained, and my scanners indicate that her respiration will soon return to normal. Summoning a physician would be superfluous in light of—”

“Damn you, machine! When I want the opinion of a walking pile of transistorized scrap, I’ll ask for it! Now, come, Wanda. I’ll clear a place for you on the couch.”

Taking her wrists, Quicksilver helped his still-shaken sister up, and then led her to a nearby, debris-spotted sofa. Behind them, the Vision remained on one knee, watching; then he rose, slowly and deliberately. To all outward appearances, he had not reacted in the slightest to the silver mutant’s actions or words. But somewhere deep within his jet-black eyes, there burned the spark of a jet-black fire.

Across the room, Iron Man pried himself from the jagged hole in the floor and walked with a slight limp to a corner where Thor, apparently none the worse for wear, stood with Mjolnir cradled in both hands before him, looking at it with undisguised bewilderment.

“ ’Tis most passing strange,” he said as Iron Man approached “Mine enchanted mallet hath ne’er gained the habit of failure. So why ’twould fall short ’gainst two such blackguards as invaded our sanctuary this morn is a conundrum indeed.”

“I’ve got a bigger one for you, Thor—like why are *you* still here? If that old man came to grab a god, like he said, then why cause all of this destruction and then leave without taking what he came for?”

“Hey, Shellhead!” The Beast came bounding up to join his teammates, shaking a last puff of plaster dust from his fur. “Is this Ellery Queen session closed to the public, or can anyone join in? ’Cause if you’re looking for posers, I’ve got a doozy for you.

“Cap’s gone.”

“What?”

All eyes had turned to the Beast, widening at his words.

“That’s right,” the erstwhile Hank McCoy continued. “I’ve looked all over the lounge—he’s not here. And the door was blocked by rubble until I opened it, so he couldn’t have gotten out that way. Which either means that he went off after that economy-sized teddy bear on his own, which doesn’t sound like his style, or else it was really Cap that old coot was after. And he got away with him.”

The Scarlet Witch’s voice had grown stronger. “But why? Why would some cratery old Indian think that Captain America was a god?”

“I don’t think he *was* an Indian, Wanda,” said Iron Man as he started across the room. “Not too many plains dwellers make a habit of conjuring up polar bears. And as for his motivations, I guess we’ll just have to find the gent and ask him about those.”

“But that’s impossible,” Pietro joined in. “We were all unconscious when he left. We have no idea where he’s gone!”

“Perhaps.” Iron Man had reached the recessed computer console. “But we’d just started a debriefing session when the cow pies hit the fan, so with a little luck we’ve got the whole skirmish on tape.”

As Tony Stark, Iron Man had designed the entire advanced computer system on which the Avengers relied for everything from security maintenance to videotaping “Mork and Mindy” when they were away on missions. Thus it was little wonder that his fingers, even while encased in crimson metal gauntlets, could play the console keyboard like a finely-tuned Steinway, bringing the tape instantly to a point mere seconds before the bizarre confrontation had begun an hour earlier.

As the six heroes sat listening in temporary chairs, warmed by portable heaters, Jarvis returned, passing out coffee (laced with medicinal brandy—a good butler anticipates), administering to minor wounds, and sewing patches on brightly colored uniforms. As he did so, he tried his best not to listen to the sounds coming from the computer’s oval speaker. Violence upset him terribly.

The Avengers, on the other hand, listened closely, trying to catch every nuance of sound the tape held. It was an unsettling experience, hearing one’s own head being cracked against a wall, hearing the screams of helpless friends, hearing the clatter of unquestionably inglorious defeat. But it was a purging with purpose, as proven by Iron Man’s first words after the tape had ended.

“Well, at least now we’ve got a direction. Two of them, in fact.”

“We do?” asked the Beast, scratching his head with a toe. “Like what?”

“Our goals,” answered the Vision, evenly, “are Alaska and Atlantis. The clues contained in the recording were unmistakable.”

“Oh,” said the Beast. “Of course. Look, Vizh, hand me a problem in quantum mechanics and I’ll give you an answer in two shakes of a lamb’s tush. But cryptography was only my minor, so how’s about clueing us all in on just what the bean curd you’re talking about?”

Iron Man couldn’t help giving in to a smile beneath his mask. “Uh, actually, Beast,” he began, “the clues weren’t all that subtle. The only Indian types living far enough north to have any truck with polar bears are Eskimos—and ‘Aningan Kenojuak’ has a definite Eskimo ring to it.

“Furthermore, our uninvited guest mentioned two geographical names in that chant he used to summon Brother Bear: Koyukuk and Talkeetnas. I’ve just run a query through the geoscan data bank and it’s confirmed my theory—the Talkeetnas are a mountain range in southern Alaska and the Koyukuk is a river in the northwestern section of that same state. Since Brother Bear’s spirit was called on to cross both of those barriers in getting here, it stands to reason that its point of origin—and, hopefully, Kenojuak’s stomping ground—lies north of the Koyukuk. I’ve also instigated a second query about—”

An electronic tone sounded from the computer console, as a thin, punch-coded card emerged from a slot on its face.

“Ah, here’s the readout now. Uhhh-huh,” Iron Man continued, reading the card. “This should make our job a little simpler. There’s only one current Eskimo community northwest of the Koyukuk, a tribe called the Bantu.”

“So that explains Alaska,” said the Scarlet Witch. “What about Atlantis?”

“Really, Wanda,” the Vision’s tone wasn’t actually condescending; merely a bit surprised, “how many acquaintances do we have with wings on their feet?”

“Oh. Ohhhh! *Namor!”*

Namor, also called the Savage Sub-Mariner, was prince of the fabled undersea kingdom of Atlantis. Born from the hybrid seed of human and Atlantean, Namor ruled his subjects with a hand both fair and firm, a hand most often curled into a fist when dealing with his half brothers on the surface. For Namor had little trust for humans—a prejudice

that had been justified on more than a few occasions—and he was ever ready to prove that the “savage” in his sobriquet was there for more than the convenience of alliteration.

Iron Man threaded the readout card through the shredder slot on the computer face. “I still haven’t the slightest idea why some Eskimo shaman would think Namor a ‘stealer of gods,’ but since Kenojuak obviously considered him important enough to send his pet monster after him, that complicates our strategy a bit.”

“Aye,” Thor spoke, rising, “e’en with Namor’s legendary strength, he’d stand little chance ’gainst a creature who hath laid low all of our number. ’Twould be the noble thing to warn him of his grave peril!”

“More than that,” Iron Man added, “it would be to our own advantage. We may have a fair idea of where Cap has been taken, but we still don’t know *why.* Maybe Namor can tell us.

“Vision, you and I can operate underwater fairly well, so we’ll go after Namor and Brother Bear. The rest of you grab a quinjet and head for Bantu territory, on the double. Any questions?”

There were none.

“All right, then—let’s go!”

Not far from the disapproving eyes of Quicksilver, the Vision and the Scarlet Witch touched hands, then lips. Nearby, Iron Man and Thor shook hands, pair-on-pair. All were silent. They knew that each one might be going to his or her respective death; they knew that every time they parted. But just because it was an accepted part of their chosen careers didn’t make it a damned bit easier.

Then, led by the bouncing, caroming Beast, the Avengers filtered out of the room, dispersing to head for their respective destinations. In their wake, Jarvis entered what

was left of the lounge—broom in one hand, dustpan in the other—and sighed.

Four

The Arctic wind whipped horizontally across the tundra, sending sheets of powder-white snow skittering over frozen topsoil. It was just after daybreak, and the temperature had barely begun to crawl back up from its nighttime low of -37°. With luck, it might reach -24° by afternoon.

In the sky, the sun hung stuck like a fuzzy thumbprint, obscured by the constantly-swirling snow, looking down on a land as barren and grim as it was incredibly beautiful. For countless miles, the ivory vista rolled on, broken only by massive drifts, occasional rock outcroppings, and a single human abode.

The isolated igloo of Aningan Kenojuak.

Inside the dome-shaped, one-room dwelling, the atmosphere was decidedly more pleasant. The curved, skin-sealed entrance corridor kept the cutting wind at bay, while a cluster of smoldering coals set in a bowlike burner at the center of the room served to warm the air tolerably. All around the chamber, furs hung from thin hooks embedded

in the sloping ice walls. Some were painted with simple designs, some were not; all served the dual purposes of decoration and insulation.

Stacked or propped neatly at one side were the usual tools of Eskimo living: an ice ax, fishing spears, and tanning equipment; along with crude, if serviceable, cooking and eating utensils. Arrayed nearby on a soft, sealskin pad were a variety of animal bones, powder pokes, brittle scrolls, and hand-carved stone figurines: the usual tools of shamanistic magic.

And just above the fur-carpeted floor at the entranceway, there was a pulsing, pink glow.

The glow hadn't been there long, only a second or two, but it grew quickly, swelling and sparkling and dancing in the close confines of the igloo. Then, as if suddenly having grown bored with itself, the glow faded, leaving behind two less animate, if more recognizable, forms: the old man with the String Of Stones, and a still-unconscious Captain America.

"We have arrived, My Lord," Aningan said simply. "Soon, all will be as it was, and the faith shall live again."

These last words wavered, as if stumbling over the old shaman's smiling lips in their eagerness to be said. His eyes blinked rapidly, holding back tears, and he looked for all the world like a man who had sworn against impossible odds to climb a staircase of a thousand steps, and had just set foot on number nine-ninty-nine.

Gingerly, he slipped bony hands under Captain America's body and, rising, lifted the unmoving Avenger with a strength normally denied men of his age. He then crossed the room and set his hallowed burden on a bed made of built-up furs, taking time to strap the alloy shield to the nodding man's shoulders before laying him back, arranging his limbs in precise symmetry, and almost as an

afterthought, brushing a lock of imaginary hair from the blue-masked forehead.

“I pray you’ll forgive me, My Lord,” said Aningan, kneeling before the altarlike platform. “I never wanted to hurt you—I never wanted to hurt anyone. But the cult of Avengers had you under an enchantment, one stronger than my magic. And the Totem instructed me, said that I must use every power at my command if I was to return you here.

“But now you are here. And isn’t that end worth the tribulations of any means, no matter how extreme?”

Captain America moaned, a sound little more than a sigh to indicate the restlessness of his unnatural sleep. But to Aningan Kenojuak, it might as well have been a primal scream.

“Oh! Oh, no! Y-You mustn’t speak! I didn’t mean for you to speak! Everything must be exactly as it was before the Great Sorrow! Exactly!”

Nervously, the old shaman fumbled with the gemstones dangling about his neck, found the right one and squeezed it tightly. Almost immediately, a shining mist began to form around Captain America’s feet, looking something like the halos that cling to street lamps on foggy nights. On seeing that haze, Aningan commenced a low, singsong chant, partly to accompany the mist as it began to move slowly and deliberately up Captain America’s body, and partly in awe of what it left in its wake.

As the mist flowed unhurriedly past the shield-slinger’s ankles, shins, and knees, it left whatever it touched encased in a cocoon of translucent, blue-white ice, no less than three feet thick. It grew evenly, slipping beneath the legs and propping them up so that the cold, smooth shell was equally thick on all sides.

The chant finished, Aningan Kenojuak sat back on his haunches and regarded his god. The ice, the red-white-and-

blue raiments, the majesty of the moment . . . all were familiar. Soon, he thought, things would be just as they were before the time of the Great Sorrow. He let a bitter smile play upon that memory.

Just as they were . . .

“The dogs, Aningan. The dogs got here before us. There’s not enough meat left to feed half the children, let alone the whole tribe!”

It was fall, the early 1960s. And what should have been a prime hunting season for the Bantu Eskimos had proven to be little more than an exercise in frustration. For the normally fruitful months following the short, relatively mild summer had been all but bereft of game. Moose and caribou were practically nonexistent, and even deadly prey like Nanook the bear seemed to have forsaken this desolate stretch of northern Alaska. Thus the Bantu had been forced to range far in their hunts, traveling deep into unfamiliar territory as their desperation grew. They knew that unless they were soon successful, unless they were able to set aside large caches of fresh and salted meat, many of their tribe would die in the long winter ahead.

Earlier that morning, a long-wandering hunting party had spotted what they had hoped to be the beginning of their salvation: a single caribou grazing on a patch of frozen grass not yet covered by the gently falling snow. They had skulked close to the animal, evincing a stealth as much the product of need as skill, and then had leaped forward to the attack.

But the hunters had been tired, hungry, and their quarry had been swift. Only one of the bone-tipped spears had struck home, and that had landed several inches below the kill zone. The caribou had bounded off, carrying the ill-thrown shaft with it and leaving a trail that the angry Eskimos had followed well into the afternoon. It had been a quest that had ended only when the parka-clad trackers had

topped the crest of a small rise and witnessed the justice-mocking tragedy beyond.

For in the shallow valley below the rise, a carcass lay sprawled amidst slivers of gore. It was the caribou. Ripped, gutted, and torn; it had been raked so clean by feral jaws that more bone remained than flesh, and its life's blood lay in spatters around it, a cooling crimson tapestry. The hundreds of footprints surrounding the corpse gave the reason—dogs. Packs of wild dogs, more wolfish than canine, were not uncommon in this wilderness land and often roamed unchecked, preying on anything weak or foolish enough to stray into their midst.

Today, they had preyed on the Bantu's dreams.

Aningan Kenojuak, already old, spoke softly from the rise. "Remove whatever meat is left. Salt it. It may sustain us until we can find the caribou's herd."

"If there *is* a herd," said one of the younger hunters, removing his curved skinning knife and half-walking, half-skidding down the rise to the corpse.

Aningan couldn't blame the young man; he was only expressing the despondency felt by them all. It wasn't pleasant, failing when the lives of one's family and friends were at stake.

Drawing his furs more tightly about him, Aningan turned from the process of salt-curing the remaining shreds of caribou meat and walked eastward. He knew that the Alatna, a tributary of the Koyukuk, was nearby, and there might be animals trying to drink from the cracks in the already ice-clogged river; anyway, he was little good at preparing game.

There were those who said he was little good at anything.

Aningan Kenojuak moved his snowshoed feet in deliberate steps, and scowled. He had been shaman to the tribe of Bantu for over three decades, and it was only recently that

his respect and influence had begun to wane. True, his power had never been great, confined mostly as it was to mixing medicinal potions, predicting game migrations, and casting runes that allowed him to perceive the world on a level somewhat beyond that of the average man. But power it was, and until lately it had been enough to establish him as the closest thing to a leader that the loosely structured tribe had.

But then came the white man.

Oh, there had always been white men at the trading post at Selawik, but that was miles and mountains away. It had only been in the last few years, when disillusionment and growing population in the other United States had increased immigration, that the problems had arisen. The young were naturally the most susceptible to the glitter of “progress,” and as the tribe had moved farther and farther north, more and more of their children had stayed behind, adapting to the new ways. Why, some of them had even taken to building homes of concrete blocks and metal sheeting, rather than living in the time-proven security of an igloo!

The Bantu had finally settled some miles from the frozen Koyukuk, and Aningan Kenojuak had done his best to keep them together. It had not been easy. The lure of packaged food and electric heat was strong competition against the constant struggle of wilderness life. And it had become even stronger in recent months, as food became scarcer and starvation seemed almost certain to dwindle their numbers even more.

Not a very good recommendation for a shaman, thought Aningan as he reached the eastern bank of the Alatna and began picking his way across the jammed ice floes that covered its surface. But how is one supposed to predict game migration when there is no game to migrate?

The shaman gained a relatively-secure foothold at the center of the floe and looked upstream. Nothing. He looked

downstream. Nothing. He looked to either bank, squinting through eyes lined with age and experience, and he sighed. There was not so much as a scavenging weasel within the range of his vision. Disappointed, he lowered his eyes—and his heart thudded against his chest as if trying desperately to get out!

For in the ice directly below his feet, there was a man.

Overcoming his initial shock, Aningan lowered himself to his knees, brushing away the patina of dry snow that partially obscured the wonderful thing he had found. Yes, it was a man, a caucasian. He was blond, with blue eyes, and he wore some sort of dark green outer garment that had been tattered, revealing a strange red-white-and-blue costume beneath. And there was something odd about this man, something about the open eyes . . .

Quickly, Aningan reached inside his parka and withdrew his runes bag—a small poke made from the bladder of an elk killed on the third day of the third month—and cast its contents onto the ice. Then, carefully containing his excitement, he strove to interpret the relationships between the tiny, decorated bones that had fallen from the bag. As he concentrated, he had no way of knowing that the man in the ice was Steve Rogers, a patriot who had served as a human guinea pig for an experimental super-soldier serum in World War II. He couldn’t know that Rogers, having gained extraordinary strength and agility as a result of that experiment, had taken the name of “Captain America” to wage his own daring campaign against the Axis powers. Nor could he know that Captain America, caught in a sabotage blast in the last days of the war, had sunk deep into the frigid waters off Newfoundland, where he was quickly frozen into a cake of ice and left to drift in a state of suspended animation until he ended up in a jammed ice floe on the Alatna River.

No, Aningan Kenojuak could know nothing of these complicated matters. But as he finished reading the last of his primitive runes, he came surprisingly close in his interpretation of exactly what the man in the ice floe was.

A miracle.

“He . . . he’s *alive!”* Fairly leaping to his feet, falling, clambering back up, Aningan ran, slid, and scrambled to the near bank, calling out in his wonder, “Haida! Potlak! Come quickly! I’ve found a man frozen in the ice—and he’s *alive!”*

Fearing their shaman to be in some danger, the rest of the hunting party was quick to answer the high-pitched cries. And soon, all were standing around the frozen figure in the ice.

“But, what can it mean?” one asked, obviously impressed.

“There can be but one explanation,” replied Aningan, his excitement undiminished. “No mere man could live while embedded in solid ice. So this being beneath us now must be something more than a man. He must be . . . a *god!*

“Yes, a god! Sent to us in our time of need to bring us good fortune. I know not why he takes the form of a white man, but the signs are unmistakable. Come, use your axes to free him—but don’t remove the ice entirely. He chose the frozen waters for his home, and we will not take that home from him.”

To say that the rest of the Bantu hunters were somewhat skeptical would be to set new standards for understatement. Nevertheless, Aningan was their shaman and, considering the success of the hunt so far, they had little better to do, anyway.

So, for the next hour, the resigned tribesmen used flaked stone axes—augmented by one or two metal blades from the frowned-upon trading post—to cut deep channels completely around the unfeeling Captain America, finally removing a single block of ice some three feet thick by

seven feet tall. Then, binding the block securely in lengths of braided hide rope, they set about the arduous task of dragging their cumbersome prize the many miles back to their village.

Their reception when they arrived, more than a week later, was about what they had expected. Wives and children were happy to see husbands and fathers, but smiles were strained, faces gaunt. Even Aningan's exultation over their astounding find could not mask the fact that their game sacks were empty. Some even queried, in mock seriousness, as to the best way to cook a god in a block of ice.

But Aningan Kenojuak was undaunted. For three days and three nights he kneeled in prayer before the frozen deity. Through sun and storm and withering wind, he prayed. While rumors that the tribe would soon disband and disperse ran rampant, he prayed. When all but the kindest elders considered him mad, he prayed.

And on the fourth day, providence answered.

Caribou! The word spread through the village like water through a sponge. A returning hunting party had found a large herd less than a mile from the village, and a great kill had been made. Most thought the herd had wandered south looking for food, or else had been driven into their territory by a neighboring tribe. No one believed that the crazy old shaman and his Popsicle god could have had anything to do with it.

That is, until the salmon started running out of season in the Koyukuk.

Being a people educated by experience, the Bantu knew nothing of temperature influxes, of how freak tropical currents sometimes made their way far north, triggering sporadic and unusual activity in sea life. All they knew was that instead of starvation, there would now be feasting and celebration.

Needless to say, Aningan Kenojuak had little trouble gaining converts for his frozen god.

The next few years were good ones for the Bantu. Weather was mild, and game was so plentiful that for the first time in memory there was excess enough to trade with the white man. Aningan's realm of power and influence grew, and regular prayer sessions were held in honor of the ice god he worshiped, and to the era of prosperity that god had brought them. As increased trade brought increased affluence, fewer people left the tribe. Aningan didn't really approve of the expanding interdependence between Eskimo and white man, but generally he was happier than he had ever been in his life.

And then, on one portentously dark day in March, came the god-stealer.

It was early morning, and the Bantu had all come to kneel in reverence before the ice god. Next to the god, facing his people, stood Aningan Kenojuak, arms upraised. He began speaking, quietly, thanking the god for a mild winter and entreating him to fill the spring with an abundance of game, when suddenly the air was cracked by a voice as deep as doomsday thunder.

"Foolish humans! Your gods are worthless!"

As one, the Bantu turned to the sky, searching for the source of the terrible words. When they found it, many wished that they hadn't; though the speaker looked like a man, an incredibly muscular man, he was obviously much more than that. For in the chill of an early March, he wore only a pair of green, skintight trunks as protection from the cold he apparently didn't feel. And, even more bizarre, he flew through the air by way of small, powerful wings that sprouted from each ankle.

Looping in midair, the winged intruder swooped down to land in front of the ice god, scattering the frightened Eskimos who had the misfortune to block his path.

“You worship idols, stupid icons!” he called, his voice reverberating in the stillness. “You use them as excuses for your wars, your oppression, and then blame them for your failures! Yours is a race of gutless otters!”

The awesome apparition then turned, bent low and lifted the half-ton block of ice in one hand. Returning to face the cowering Bantu, he sneered. “I am Namor, Prince of Atlantis—and I challenge your false god!”

So saying, Namor heaved the ice block like a huge javelin, sending it sailing in a high arc to come crashing down into the chill waters of the Koyukuk miles away. For a tense moment, there was nothing but silence. And then Namor spoke, deprecation dripping from his words.

“Bah. Your courage is as worthless as your gods.”

With a flap of tiny wings, the Sub-Mariner was airborne, and in seconds was but a vanishing spot on the horizon. Aningan Kenojuak watched him sail off, eyes wide with wonder at why his god—a World War II hero who had been frozen solid for years—had not brought down lightning to strike the heretic dead. Apparently, that was a thought shared by most of the Bantu. For when Aningan turned to face them, they were already dispersing.

Three months later, Aningan Kenojuak left his tribe. Perhaps it was because he had proven ineffective against the single, winged interloper, or perhaps it was merely because the hunting had gone bad again. But whatever the reason, the Bantu seemed to have little use for gods or shamans anymore.

Retreating into self-exile, Aningan built an igloo as far from human habitations as he could. There he spent every available moment in prayer; he prayed to the ice god, he prayed to the bear god, he prayed to any god he thought might listen. And always he asked for but a single boon—the power to take revenge on the god-stealer and restore faith to his people.

Fifteen years later, that prayer was answered.

“There, My Lord. Now things are just as they were.”

Captain America was now completely covered by the thick ice, and the foggy mist had disappeared. Aningan Kenojuak reached out a hand from his kneeling position and touched the rock-hard block, stroking its blue-white curves affectionately and smiling with trembling lips. Then he rose, his features setting into harder lines as he moved his hand to touch the String Of Stones.

“Come, My Lord. It is time.”

A familiar pink glow began to engulf both shaman and ice block, as each began to waver and fade.

“The Totem provided the power, but it is up to me to restore the faith. And restore it I shall, spreading your glory throughout the entire Bantu territory, until all shall sing your praises. And this time, no wing-footed heathen will defile your splendor.”

The old shaman’s smile grew thinner as his eyes narrowed.

“Brother Bear shall see to that.”

Five

The water was warm, relatively. A steady 54° according to the microgauge just above the left eye slit inside Iron Man's helmet. Not that the Golden Avenger could actually *feel* that warmth, of course. For mere seconds before he had plunged down through the smooth surface of the Atlantic, now a good quarter mile above, he had triggered Plexiglass shields to slide down over his mouth and eye slits. Now, he was completely sealed within his steel-mesh armor, cut off from the liquid environment outside, totally dependent on his self-contained air recirculator and the complex network of neurosensors that ran just beneath the refractory coating of his metal shell. And he felt as comfortable as a fish.

Two hours earlier, he had stood alongside the Vision on the rooftop launch pad at Avengers Mansion, watching as a sleek quinjet rose vertically, then angled westward at tremendous speed. The quinjet was a stainless-steel miracle of simplicity and power: five incredibly efficient engines, a cone-shaped cockpit big enough to hold ten passengers with

gear, and an acceleration rate that would get that payload to Alaska in under six hours. It was the envy of every aeronautical engineer in the world and was designed, naturally, by Tony Stark.

After the quinjet had faded from view, Iron Man and the Vision had taken to the air themselves, flying south over Brooklyn past Coney Island, then banking eastward to zoom out over the open ocean. There, Iron Man had activated the boosters on his solar-powered boot jets, rapidly increasing his speed to just below that of sound. The Vision had paced him, effortlessly. Some time later, they had arced downward, cleaving the green waters of the Atlantic like twin bullets, and now they skimmed some twenty feet above the coral- and sand-covered ocean bottom.

The terrain was surprisingly light for being so deep, Iron Man thought as his boot jets pushed him along at a swift glide. He had dropped the infrared visors over his eye slits out of habit, but could probably have done equally well with the dim, but adequate, light filtering down through the calm waters overhead. Warmth and light, he considered. No wonder the Atlanteans had chosen this area to establish their undersea kingdom.

Turning his head subtly, Iron Man regarded the scarlet-skinned synthezoid who slid smoothly through the water a double arm’s length to his right. The Vision hadn’t spoken a word since leaving Manhattan, and though taciturn at the best of times, this current silence seemed the product of more than his usual machinelike stoicism.

“Something troubling you, Vizh?” he asked, the hidden speakers in his ear cones transmitting his words clearly through the water. “Or is it my breath?”

“I find it difficult to analyze your oxygen-expiration cycle in this environment, Iron Man,” answered the Vision, serious as stone. “Nevertheless, something does puzzle me. When I first attempted to enter the body of the creature called

Brother Bear, I sensed that something was not as it seemed."

"Hmm, I do seem to recall your saying something to the effect of 'It isn't . . .' on the tape."

"Precisely. Yet in the ensuing forced systems overload, some of my memory circuits were burned out. The circuits, themselves, have since been repaired, but the information they contained, including what I had learned about Brother Bear, has been lost. It is most annoying."

Sure, thought Iron Man. A giant supernatural monster tries to torch your insides to a crunchy crisp, succeeds in obliterating an entire section of your memory, and the strongest term you can think of to apply to the situation is "annoying." Right!

Once more, Iron Man observed the Vision from the corner of his eye, and for maybe the million-and-twelfth time considered the differences between them. Inside Iron Man's artificial exterior, there was a man; while inside the Vision's artificial exterior, there was an equally artificial interior. Yet there was much more to it than that. Because the Vision's brain patterns had originally been taken from a human being, from Simon Williams who, as the super-strong Wonder Man, had once fought the Avengers, only later to turn to the cause of justice and join them. Thus, somewhere within that mass of plastic relays and wired organs, there was trapped the partial persona of a man. A man who constantly had to cope with a world in which the only warmth he knew was the occasional spark of an electric circuit, where feelings were filtered through neurosensors to a brain that analyzed them in the cold light of logic and suggested coded responses that were at times difficult to override. When Iron Man grew weary of the trying life of a superhero, he discarded his metal shell and escaped into the playboy world of millionaire Tony Stark; when the Vision

grew weary of the trying life of a superhero, he remained the Vision. And the Vision never slept.

Inside his gold-and-crimson armor, Tony Stark shuddered a bit, derailing the rather morbid train of thought he had been riding. As he turned his concentration back to the seascape before him, he found that his respect for the Vision had jumped up a notch. And that his respect for the Scarlet Witch had jumped up two.

Banking slightly to the right and rising a few feet higher above the ocean floor, the two Avengers continued their journey, passing through a narrow, V-shaped valley between two steep ranges of undersea mountains. So intent were they on their own private musings that neither noticed the blue-skinned warrior who crouched behind a coral outcropping as they passed, speaking low into a slender, hand-held transmitting device.

Moments later, Iron Man and the Vision approached the end of the valley, beginning an angle of descent that would bring them to the virtual doorstep of fabled Atlantis. Then, rounding a last jutting pillar of rock and coral, they came face-to-face with that legendary kingdom—and the results of its blue-skinned sentry’s transmission. For standing directly between the Avengers and the high-spired, pastel-hued city of Atlantis were fully half a hundred armed and armored Atlantean soldiers. Some sat at the controls of treaded, tanklike war machines; others held an incongruous gallimaufry of hand weapons, from spears to sleek blaster rifles. All looked deadly. Some several yards before their point line, hovering astride a gigantic, green-gray sea horse and holding an impressive gold scepter, rode their majestic monarch and commander in chief.

The Savage Sub-Mariner.

Iron Man started to speak, but stopped as he turned in reaction to sounds from behind. There, streaming from either side of the mountain-rimmed valley, were the other

half of the hundred soldiers. Moving swiftly, they had soon joined ranks with their fellows, forming a circle that effectively cut off all escape routes save for the rather dubious security of a sprint straight up to the surface.

Iron Man turned back to face the Prince of Atlantis. “It seems, Namor,” he said, making an effort to keep his voice even, “that you have an advantage over us.”

“That I have,” answered the Sea Prince. “And it is an advantage that I intend to keep. You are unwelcome here, as are all those who dwell above the Earth’s waters. If you have business, state it—then begone.”

The speech was terse, definitive, and echoed through the water in tones that fairly crackled with regality and command. But even silent, the Sub-Mariner was an imposing entity. He stood a full six and a half feet tall, with shoulders that would rival an Olympic weight lifter’s, yet had a waist that would make the average nine-to-five executive groan with envy. Below that waist he wore his only garment, a pair of dark-green trunks woven in a fish-scale pattern. Unlike his light blue subjects, his skin was cream colored, giving evidence of his half-breed heritage. And on either side of each ankle grew small, white wings, lying flush to the calf when not employed to propel their master through water or air. At Namor’s opposite end was a head that was almost triangular, topped with straight, jet-black hair that ended in a widow’s peak an inch or so above the bridge of his aquiline nose. That head also sported a pair of slate-gray eyes that presently glared at Iron Man and the Vision, fixing them with an uncomfortable combination of contempt, caution, and fading patience.

“Well?” Namor’s lips curled downward, as if the single word had been a maggot crawling from his mouth.

Iron Man took a deep breath of recirculated air. “One of our members has been kidnapped, Namor, by a power we don’t understand. We were hoping that information you

possess might help us to save him. We also have reason to believe that that same power may pose danger to you as well."

"Feh!" spat the Sub-Mariner, almost amused. "When once I urged my people to give the surface-dwellers their chance, when I went myself to speak of peaceful coexistence at your United Nations, I was met with naught but stones, guns, and fear. And now you wish to tell me that, all of a sudden, you are concerned over my well-being? I would say that I was touched, Avenger—but I truly believe that turn of phrase applies more accurately to *you!"*

Iron Man gripped his anger and held it down, Time could well be running out for Captain America.

"Listen, Prince, I admit that my people and yours have had their differences in the past, and maybe the majority of the blame lies with us, but—"

"Oh, how characteristically magnanimous! You accept a *majority,* do you? Then I suppose you expect Atlantis to dutifully accept her minority of fault for the poisons you pump into the very water we breathe? For the radioactive wastes that kill our crops and stunt our livestock? For the blankets of spilled oil that cut us off from the life-giving rays of the sun? Oh, how very, *very* kind of you, indeed!"

"Damn it, Namor!" The last straw had fallen. Iron Man stepped forward; Atlantean weapons were raised. "All I wanted to do was talk! But if you aren't willing to listen, then by God—"

"Stop!" The Vision had raised a single hand, his voice cutting through the water and the tension like a razor through warm cheese. "Perhaps useless combat may be avoided if our position were to be restated from a different perspective."

Silence. All eyes were on the Vision as he continued. "A friend of ours is in danger. We are prepared to go to any and

all extremes to release our friend from his peril. We believe that the noble Prince of Atlantis would do the same, were the roles reversed. That is why we have come seeking his aid."

For a moment, Namor merely stared at the Vision. And then his features slowly relaxed, affecting a small smile of approval. "You are a diplomat, red-skin, and a good one. Very well, I will listen."

So saying, the Sub-Mariner swung one leg over the neck of his sea-horse mount and slid down to the sand, crossing the distance between him and the intruders with a grace and bearing that would have remained unchanged even if the hundred surrounding soldiers had been Avengers. Then, for the next ten minutes, he listened intently as Iron Man outlined in as much detail as possible the events that had transpired in Manhattan some hours earlier. When the tale was finished, Namor looked slightly more puzzled than annoyed.

"I'm afraid I've little to offer, Iron Man. My only experience with northern Indians such as you describe came years ago. I was returning to Atlantis from my initial battle with your superhero team"—there was not a trace of embarrassment in Namor's voice—"when I encountered a tribe of primitive humans worshiping some sort of figure frozen in ice. It angered me to see humans venerating false icons, gods upon whom they would undoubtedly heap their own shortcomings in the name of 'divine will,' and so I hurled their deity into a nearby river and left. Naturally, I gave the matter no more thought, and I still don't see how the incident could have importance."

However, in the mind inside the gold-and-crimson helmet, pieces of a puzzle shifted and locked into place. For Iron Man also remembered the aftermath of the Avengers' first battle with the Sub-Mariner. Returning from that conflict in an undersea jet craft, he, Giant-Man, Thor, and the Wasp

had been startled to find a man floating in their path, a man frozen in a state of suspended animation inside a block of slowly-melting ice. Taking that block on board and completing the melting process, they had discovered its contents to be the living legend of World War II, Captain America. And none was more surprised than he to find that he was still a *living* legend! Soon after, Cap had joined the ranks of the Avengers, and had remained one of their most valued members to this day. And neither he nor his fellows had ever discovered the reason for his being found adrift in a block of ice in the North Bering Sea.

Until now.

“Namor,” Iron Man spoke excitedly into his helmet microphone, “I think we’ve every reason to believe that ‘god’ in the ice block you chucked was Captain America, the very Avenger who was stolen from New York!”

Quickly, Iron Man explained his theory, after which the Vision concurred.

“It would seem logical to assume that the man who attacked us at our headquarters was one of the Eskimos who worshiped Captain America—probably the shaman, judging from the extent of his powers. That would explain why he referred to you as a ‘wing-footed stealer of gods,’ as well as why he chose you as a target for—”

“AAIIIEEEEE!”

The scream was more of surprise than fear, and came from the stretched-open mouth of one of the Atlantean warriors. For the tanklike vehicle at whose controls he sat had begun to rise, teetering, despite the fact that its lift engines had not been activated. The driver’s fellow soldiers turned to gape, though not so much at the tank as at the creature who stood beneath it, slowly lifting the massive war machine until he held it at arm’s length over his head, looking for all the world like some snaggletoothed, furry Atlas.

It was Brother Bear.

“Namor, that’s it!” Iron Man’s amplification circuits duly boosted the urgency of his words. “That’s Kenojuak’s monster! The one that attacked us!”

“Then by Neptune’s trident,” the Sub-Mariner answered grimly, “if it’s come for a god-stealer, then a god-stealer it shall *have!”*

“No, Namor! Wait!” Iron Man reached out, but the Sea Prince was already gone, his powerful ankle wings carrying him swiftly over the sand toward the hulking, yellow-green, monstrosity. In his wake, Iron Man watched with clenched fists and narrowed eyes.

“You know something, Vision?” he said softly. “I’m almost going to enjoy this.”

The Atlanteans had pulled back, leaving Brother Bear alone with the war tank raised over his head. As the ranks parted, Brother Bear saw his primary objective coming through the water toward him, and he smiled—an unclean slash of tooth and gum that could curdle cream. Then, raising his burden higher, he snapped his arms forward to send the sleek war machine flying straight at the onrushing Sub-Mariner.

Namor didn’t swerve. Instead, he merely brought his own hammerlike fist back and, as the terrified driver dove for safety, rammed it into the tank with an impact that split the vehicle down the middle, sending scraps of metal and sputtering components spinning and scattering over the ocean floor. He then continued toward his original target, confident that he would repeat his actions against the grotesque bear-creature.

But if Brother Bear was concerned, he didn’t show it. Instead, he raised his left paw up behind him and, when the Atlantean prince drew close, brought it back around in a move that was uncannily fast, as if the hairy arm met no

resistance from the water whatsoever. The paw hit Namor's right shoulder with incredible, and irresistible force; so much so that instead of slamming into Brother Bear, the stunned monarch angled off to slam into the silt and sand of the ocean floor, digging a shallow groove in the upper layers for several yards until at last coming to an ignominious halt, upended and unmoving.

Immediately, the fur-matted servant of Aningan Kenojuak was caught in a barrage of laser bolts and metal-tipped spears, as the angered Atlantean Army moved forward. It mattered little that Namor was more powerful than all of them combined, and that he had fallen to a single blow. It mattered only that he was, after all, their prince.

Nearby, Iron Man saw the futility of the attack, just as he saw Brother Bear begin a slow, deliberate shuffle toward the still-groggy Namor. Triggering his boot jets, he took off in the direction of the battle, calling out over his speaker system, "So much for teaching Subby a lesson, Vision. We've got to stop that monster! Come on!"

However, the Vision had already plied his usual array of weapons and tactics against this particular menace, and had met with failure. Thus he stood his ground and proceeded with the one course of action that seemed sensible given the circumstances: he thought.

Meanwhile, Iron Man reached the remains of the laser tank and, with a single, swift jerk, ripped the treads from one side. Then, swim-flying in a curve around Brother Bear, he swooped in behind the creature and looped the length of tread around its massive shoulders, pulling it taut. For a moment, he hung there, suspended, looking something like a pet owner walking a stubborn dog as he strained to tug his monstrous opponent off balance. For his part, Brother Bear stood fast, choosing only to twist his head around slightly and offer a low snarl in acknowledgment of the temporary stalemate.

Nearby, the Vision came to stand next to the furious Sub-Mariner. Namor regained his senses, and scrambled to his feet, then motioned for his soldiers to withdraw. This was one fight he wanted for himself.

“That despicable cur shall pay for what he’s done! I’ll hang his ears from the rafters of the royal throne room! By Neptune, no one lays hands on a Prince Of The Blood with impunity!”

“If you insist on pursuing your current strategy, Namor,” the Vision stated calmly, “I’m afraid that a large portion of that princely blood will soon mingle with the water around us.”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“I mean, Sea Prince, that this creature defeated seven Avengers—the selfsame team that you, yourself, have fought to a standstill in the past. Alone, you could never prevail; yet together, there may still be hope.”

The Sub-Mariner, though stubborn, was not stupid. In the space of a heartbeat, he had accepted the truth. “You have a plan, red skin?”

“You are the one Brother Bear seeks. It is you he will follow. Therefore, you must swim away from us, into the valley beyond Atlantis, where—”

“What? Prince Namor, run from battle? You are either mad, android, or you have sorely underestimated the mettle of the one true Sub-Mariner!”

Yards away, Iron Man had heard the entire exchange, and now responded. “Namor, for once can’t you just stifle your bloody arrogance? If you can’t live with the idea of running, then think of it as leading the danger away from your people. But however you label it, you’d better do it fast!”

As if to illustrate Iron Man’s words, the tread holding Brother Bear chose that moment to snap, causing the Golden Avenger to tumble backward awkwardly while the

glowing polar menace resumed its forward stride, faster now, as if sensing the ambivalence of its prey.

Only short, deadly feet away, Namor looked around at his courageous, but obviously inadequate, troops, made a decision and sprang from the ocean floor, his ankle wings taking him in a smooth, graceful curve over Brother Bear's head and into the mouth of the proximate valley. The sound he made could have been that of the rapidly displaced waters in his wake—but seemed suspiciously similar to a disconsolate grunt.

Brother Bear, angry at seeing the successful conclusion to his mission swimming frustratingly away like a carefree trout, growled his displeasure and turned to follow; while Iron Man and the Vision had taken flight immediately after Namor and quickly approached the mountainous sides of the undersea valley.

"If I read you right," Iron Man called out, "you want to pull a Jericho number once our fuzzy playmate enters the valley. Close?"

"You are most discerning, Iron Man," answered the Vision.

"There's often a thin line, old friend, between discernment and desperation. I'll take the right side."

Brother Bear lumbered between the flanking mountains of the valley when the two Avengers split apart, Iron Man zooming over the supernatural assassin's head as if pursuing the Sub-Mariner. Then, some hundred yards into the valley, he turned to face the towering inward mountain directly to Brother Bear's right, at the same time cybernetically activating the tractor-beam unit mounted on his chest plate. The tractor beam was a unique development of Stark International, and worked through experimental magnetism techniques to exert a tremendous pull on anything with even a microscopic mineral content. When the beam struck the mountain, the mountain quivered.

Inside his armor, Tony Stark felt droplets of sweat trickle down his temples as he increased his concentration, thereby increasing the intensity of the tractor beam. In seconds, the mountain began to rumble . . . and then to topple!

Contemporaneously, the Vision had dematerialized, his physical form becoming so light that he was able to easily enter the mountain on Brother Bear's left, passing between its molecules like a wraith. Quickly, he explored the undersea monolith's interior, analyzing strata and structure until at last, at the mountain's base, he found what he sought: a fault line. It was a small one, true, but it should provide enough latent instability for him to carry out his part of the plan.

Matter-of-factly, the Vision positioned himself along the fault line and then, in less time than the oft-mentioned split second, he increased his density from lighter than hydrogen to several times heavier than uranium-238. The results were impressive. Inside the mountain, the rock strata literally exploded, shattered by the incredible pressures; while outside, the coral-covered mound actually jumped, as if kicked from beneath, and began to slide along the fault line, tottering and tipping over to fall straight toward Brother Bear.

In the center of the valley, the glowing bear-thing must have realized that he had no hope of avoiding the tumbling masses on either side. For he merely stood there, head turned slightly, lips drawn back in a snarl that went beyond human anger. If he had had the mental and vocal abilities to curse, he would have undoubtedly let loose a string of expletives that would put a longshoreman to shame. And then the cascading debris hit—and where once stood Brother Bear, there now stood a new mountain.

Iron Man and the Vision made their way through the silt-filled waters to stand at the base of the still-settling knoll. They were soon joined by the returning Sub-Mariner.

“Your plan was a sound one, redskin,” the Atlantean intoned, speaking with assured satisfaction. “Our mutual enemy has been vanquished.”

“For the moment, Prince Namor,” the Vision answered with his usual even modulation. “But only for the moment.”

“Eh? What do you mean? The beast is buried under tons of stone and sand!”

“What the Vision means,” Iron Man joined in, “is that Brother Bear isn’t your everyday frolicsome forest creature. He’s a supernatural construct that isn’t going to die just because we want him to. As soon as he claws his way out of that rubble, he’ll be on the rampage again. And the only hope we have of stopping him for good is to get hold of the Eskimo medicine man who conjured him up—and maybe in the process pull Captain America’s fat out of the fire.

“Look, Namor, maybe we could do it without you—but maybe we couldn’t. Either way, your help would make things a lot easier. So what do you say?”

Namor considered, his face shadowed with a frown. “How do I know this isn’t some surface man’s trick? A ploy to get me away from my people so that the air breathers might exploit them as they have in the past?”

Iron Man’s sigh was barely audible through his speakers. “I guess you’re just going to have to trust us, Prince. Because when that bear-creature gets free, he’s going to cause more havoc and carnage than my people ever could. We’ve got to work together, Namor.” He paused, and then, “Please.”

The Sub-Mariner stood erect, hands on slender hips, his face fixed with a look of cautious resignation. “No,” he said, “I will not trust you.

“But I will help you.”

Interlude

The low drone of chanting was interrupted for the second time in less than an hour, and for the second time in less than an hour a curious face poked its way out of the log cabin’s door. The face, bespectacled and bearded, belonged to one Fredrick Quintin Zitz, ex-radical, ex-revolutionary and neo-homesteader in the wilderness of southern Alaska. Pulling his olive-drab army coat tighter around his throat, Fred Zitz stepped from his cabin onto the packed snow walkway before it, raising his squinting eyes to look for the source of the whooshing sound that had broken his concentration. And just when he was about to reach nirvana, damnit!

Fred had learned about nirvana back at Berkley in the sixties. He’d learned about a lot of things then: about love and sex, about politics and power, and about the marvelous combinations of chemicals that could do everything from expanding your mind to exploding your local draft office. It had been a time of growth and movement and commitment,

and Fred had grown and moved and committed himself to a series of very special ideals. The world had been a vital place, and he had belonged in it.

Vaguely, Fred realized that the whooshing distraction had already passed over his cabin, and so moved around to the side of the structure, kicking at hard lumps of snow with his fringed boots and stepping past his old Volkswagen beetle, the one with the peeling flower decals and the tattered ecology flag that hung limp and windless from the bent radio-antenna.

He had come to Alaska some years before, when the decade had changed—and everything else had stopped changing. It had almost seemed as if the world had heaved a collective sigh and said “the hell with it,” with everyone deciding to live for themselves and let the future fall where it might. At first, Fred had occasionally given in to the hope that mankind would pull itself from its self-inflicted quagmire of apathy and abandon—but then he would flip the dial on his battery-powered radio. And between the incessant barrages of butter-slick ads and the mindless hum of disco music (a term he considered contradictory), he would sigh and realize that relevance was still being relegated to boogie fever and the methodical elimination of panty lines.

And so Fred Zitz now spent his days doing simple chores. In summer, he would tend his small organic garden, harvesting and preserving crops to be eaten or smoked during the long winter months. And when that winter came, he would hunt and trap small game. (Fred had been an ardent anti-war activist, but had subsequently decided that it was all right to kill as long as one did so only for food. After all, he figured, every time you order a Big Mac you’re sanctioning someone else to kill a cow, right?) And, of course, he meditated.

Rounding a rear corner of his cabin, Fred shielded his eyes as he looked to the sky, searching for the reason why his

morning mantra had been disturbed. And he found it. There to the north, flying toward the horizon at what must have been very close to the speed of sound, were three men. One had bright crimson skin and sported a flapping yellow cape; one wore a suit of gold-and-red metal; and one wore nothing but a pair of green swimming trunks.

“Far out,” said Fred Zitz. Maybe he *had* reached nirvana, after all!

The three flying figures diminished, then disappeared, and Fred turned back to walk to the front of his cabin. He decided that he wouldn’t tell Mr. Cassidy over at the trading post of what he’d seen, just as he wouldn’t mention the strange sight he’d witnessed a half hour earlier: the silvery jet that had swooped low over his homestead, banking so that he could see that it was being piloted by a blue gorilla. No, ol’ “Hoppy” already thought he was a weirdo. (Cassidy was probably one of the few people still alive who used the term “hippie” regularly) and there was no use in adding fuel to the prejudicial fire.

Closing the cabin door behind him, Fred crossed the dark, sparsely furnished room and sat down on his genuine polyester fur rug. As he lit a fresh stick of strawberry incense, he thought of a friend he had had in school. The friend had been from Tennessee, and frequently wore a sometimes-controversial button with the slogan, “The South shall rise again!”. As he closed his eyes and touched his middle fingers to his thumbs and began chanting a low, throaty “ommmmmmm,” Fred Zitz wondered if the same thing could ever be said about the sixties.

Right on, right on, right on.

Six

“Are we not men?”

“We are Devo! D-e-v-o!”

Quicksilver scowled as he scrunched down a little lower in his plush chair at the rear of the quinjet’s cockpit. Normally, he considered the combination crew and passenger area—roughly the same size as the passenger lounge in a top of the line Learjet—to be more than comfortably spacious. But now, he thought, the full length of a 747 couldn’t keep him far enough away from the strains of electric guitar and semi-harmony that screeched from the twin speakers set in the craft’s control console.

“My *God,* Beast!” he bellowed. “Can’t we listen to something beside that cacophony of useless noise? I know we’ve tapes of Wagner and Sibelius on board—I purchased them myself!”

Slumped comfortably in the swiveling pilots seat, one leg draped casually over an armrest and one furry finger deftly manipulating the ultrasensitive control lever, the blue-hued Beast cocked his head back toward Quicksilver.

“Aw, come on, Quicksy. Don’t be such a stick-in-the-muck. Punk rock is like modern art. It’s like theater of the absurd. It’s the ultimate expression of the frustration and paranoia that permeates to the core of today’s society. And anyway,” he added, turning back to the control console with a sly grin, “it’s always good for a couple of laughs.”

Quicksilver grimaced, cringing at a particularly discordant passage. “Really, Thor, Iron Man appointed you leader of this subgroup. Can’t you do *something?* I honestly believe the upper range of my aural sensitivity is being permanently impaired!”

Standing at one side of the cockpit, looking down out of the wide, curved windshield, Thor’s expression was also somewhat pinched. “Verily, I doth admit to a distinct preference for the dulcet tones of an Asgardian choir,” he said, turning to face the other three Avengers, “but our number hath a standing rule that doth allow this vehicle’s operator his choice of amusements. And ’tis a doctrine I see no warrant for abandoning now.”

Answering with a simple expulsion of air through clenched teeth, Quicksilver turned his chair completely around to face the rear of the cockpit. Then, as if in punctuation, he jammed his fingers melodramatically into his ears and began humming the first movement of Dvorak’s *New World Symphony.* Off-key.

The Scarlet Witch, seated leisurely in the copilot’s chair, swiveled around to face the Beast, smiling sweetly. “Don’t worry, Hank, I understand. You’re just trying to make a long trip go faster, right?”

“Hey, Wanda, you got it. Right on the ol’ nose-a-roony.”

“Of course I do. I mean, all this mile-after-mile travel can get monotonous, even at the speed we’re going. And heaven forbid if we should be bored going into battle, especially into one that might cost us our very lives. Why,

it’s so much more practical to stay alert by being angry, aggravated, and generally annoyed, isn’t it?”

“Uh,” the Beast cleared his throat, somewhat self-consciously swinging his leg down from the armrest and sitting up straighter. “Point taken, Wanda. *Scuzi.”*

With that, he reached over and plucked the *“Devo”* tape from its nearby slot and tossed it with characteristic skill into the floor-mounted disposal chute some ten feet away. Then he rummaged through an array of eight-track cartridges on a shelf beneath the console, slid one of Cap’s tapes into the slot, and returned, resignedly, to the task of piloting the quinjet. Soon, the laid-back voice of Perry Como filled the cockpit.

The rest of the trip should go okay, thought the Beast, *if I can just keep from throwing up on the dashboard.*

But though the tension quickly ebbed within the speeding aircraft, it was not replaced by joviality or small talk. For as the miles of Alaskan countryside continued to pass below, the Avengers’ thoughts turned inward, creating a brooding silence that was nearly as oppressive as it was calm.

The Scarlet Witch brought a hand up to hold her chin between forefinger and thumb, looking out past the hard glass of the windshield, past the chopped winter clouds, to see the face of her husband. She had been separated from the Vision in battle numerous times before—and she had hated it then, too. But they were professionals, with a professional’s attitude. Thus they accepted their assignments in stride, from fighting interstellar wars to filling out endless report forms to, in those rare instances when Jarvis was on vacation, even taking out the garbage.

But this time things were different. This time the Vision was going up against an enemy he had fought, and lost to, before. An enemy whose origin and capabilities were unknown, an enemy who had withstood the Vision’s greatest weapons without harm, an enemy who could quite

possibly douse his life with the ease of a thumb snuffing a candle. She wanted to be with him, to help him and, if it came to that, to die with him. And it was little comfort to consider that he was almost certainly thinking the same about her. But she was, indeed, a professional, and so merely sat quietly in the copilot's seat, knowing that all she could really do was look at the clouds . . . and love him.

At the rear of the cockpit, Quicksilver had turned his chair back around—the crooning that now wafted from the stereo speakers had no texture, but at least it was inoffensive. Settling himself more comfortably into the plush seat cushion, he scowled. It seemed as though his whole life had been a compromise, and sometimes he thought that he would have been better off had he remained in Europe, on the run, a mutant hunted for the sin of being different. At least then he had been his own man. But when the opportunity to join the Avengers had come, he had taken it eagerly; not for himself, but for his sister. And that had led to the greatest compromise of all.

For shortly before he and Wanda had been orphaned, their father had taken him aside and, as if acting on some premonition, had made him swear to always take care of his sister. Pietro had loved his father, and had done everything in his power to live up to that last promise he had made to him. Joining the Avengers had thus seemed the right move. If they were fated to face danger, it might as well be in the company of other powerful beings who could enhance their chances for survival. And so he had accepted the regimen of working within a team, had accepted the roll of superhero, and he had endured.

But then Wanda had married that . . . *machine!* And a great portion of his responsibility as protector had shifted to a wire-and-plastic mannequin whose very claim to life was, at best, dubious. He had felt lessened by that marriage, and demeaned, as his sister should have. But Wanda had proven

content in that joining, and thus he had lost control of one part of her destiny forever. He now looked to the front of the quinjet, at the strongly beautiful woman who was his sister, and his scowl deepened.

He was tired of compromise.

Respecting the air of introspection that pervaded the cockpit, Thor quietly crossed the passenger section to sit in one of the empty chairs, stooping slightly as he walked so that his winged helm wouldn't scrape the ceiling. He placed Mjolnir on legginged knees, horizontal, hand resting loosely on handle, and considered his situation. He was a god, the son of Odin, and the mightiest warrior in the far-off, mystical realm of Asgard. He had friends in that homeland—Hogun, Fandral, Volstagg among others—friends who were loyal and stouthearted and true. Yet he felt a special affection for these mortal Earthlings at whose side he had fought so many times—an affection, and a respect.

For whereas he had been born a hero, granted his power and destiny by heritage and the higher gods, these self-styled Avengers had *chosen* their lot. Sporting abilities gained by manufacture or accident, they had elected to spend their fleeting, mortal lives in the combatting of evil, and the pursuit of just causes. His heart went out to his courageous comrades, and he hoped that their quest for Captain America would prove both short and successful. Because though, as a god, he had fair assurance that he would survive their rapidly approaching encounter with the unknown, he could only pray to his father that he would not be alone in that continuance.

The quinjet sped over increasingly bleak terrain, making a slight course change to the northwest. While at the cockpit console, the Beast switched from a near empty fuel tank to a full one, and caught himself singing along with the lyrics of "Find a ring, and it goes round, round, round . . ." Quickly, he glanced from side to side to see if anyone had noticed.

Apparently, no one had. Thankful for spared embarrassment, he closed his eyes and sat back, heaving a sigh of relief. Which made it all the more startling when the Scarlet Witch spoke.

"Beast?"

"Hnyah? What?" The fuzzy pilot jumped in his seat—which, for the Beast, meant a good twelve inches off the cushion. "Oh, uh, yeah, Wanda? What is it?"

The Scarlet Witch was holding a standard navigation chart in her lap, pointing to an area in northern Alaska that had been marked with a red, felt-tipped pen. "According to this, we're almost there. Another eight to ten minutes and we should be flying over the Bantu village."

"Yeah, I know. I was just waiting 'til we got a little closer to break the good news. But what the—hey!" He turned in his seat to face the other two Avengers. "Heads up, guys, Eskimo country dead ahead. Keep your eyes peeled for polar bears, takeout blubber joints, and anyone who looks like Anthony Quinn."

Nobody laughed at the Beast's humor, not even the Beast. But the mood inside the hurtling quinjet had altered, nevertheless. Gone was the heavy aura of soul-searching, the sullen air of discontent. In their place was an electricity, an excitement, a quickening of the pulse, and a heightening of the senses. And there was one more sensation that crackled through the cockpit, a feeling that was as much a part of being an Avenger as was pride or courage.

It was the dry, anticipatory tang of fear.

The wind had eased considerably, and the snow had stopped altogether. Aningan Kenojuak stood at the base of a small hill and remembered. It had been well over a decade since he had last been here, and his nostrils dilated eagerly to the smell of the place, his eyes half closing with visions of

the past. Over this single rise was the village of the Bantu—his village. He could almost see the scattered mounds of the igloos, the billowing ribbons of smoke rising from the cooking fires. He knew that the mighty Koyukuk followed its familiar path in the distance, its surface pock-marked with fishing holes, and dotted with the cured hide shelters of the fishermen. He longed for that sight, longed for it as a man lost in a desert longs for water, as a man damned for eternity longs for salvation.

“Can you sense it, My Lord? Can you taste the very splendor of it all? In mere moments, we shall be among our people once again. You will be worshiped for all the wonderment and fortune you bring, while I will be looked to for wisdom and guidance. We shall be home . . .”

There was a sparkle in the old shaman’s eyes, and a lilt in his voice that hadn’t been there for years. At his side, Captain America took no notice, being as he was still encased, unconscious, in a block of ice that floated approximately a foot above the frozen ground.

Aningan and his charge had appeared in a pink nimbus some fifteen minutes earlier, and he had spent the time since in looking, thinking, smelling—and in screwing up his courage. Now, he began to make his way up the hill, tentatively placing one heavily-booted foot before the other, savoring each small footstep. One hand stroked the shiny String Of Stones that dangled outside of the thick fur parka that he now wore. And like a bizarre, obedient puppy, the ice-crusted Captain America followed, hovering above the snow as if suspended from hidden wires.

Aningan stumbled, regained his footing, and hurried on, scrambling now, unable to control his excitement. Finally, he reached the top of the rise and turned his gaze to the site of the village in which he had lived for so many years, and of which he had dreamed for so many more.

The village wasn’t there.

The aged Eskimo blinked. He shut his eyes tightly and then opened them, slowly, unbelievingly. There were no igloos at the bottom of the hill. There were no cook fires, no dogsleds, no fishnets or drying racks. There was instead what could only be called a town. Two rows of cinder-block and shingle buildings ran parallel to each other for a length of several hundred yards, terminating at either end in a hodgepodge of more temporary-looking wood-and-canvas structures. The buildings were fronted by long, wood-plank sidewalks that ran their entire length, and the area that separated the rows—the street?—had been cleared of snow so that the occasional jeep or land rover could slog slowly through inches-deep mud and slush. The often hand-lettered signs proclaimed certain buildings to be bar, hotel, or company store, and sky-grabbing television and radio antennas reached from the roofs of many of them. The town was busy, and while some of its scurrying citizens were Eskimos, most were white.

Aningan Kenojuak didn’t understand. He looked to the distance, searching for the river, thinking that perhaps he had made a mistake, that the years of isolation had played tricks with his sense of direction. But no, the mighty Koyukuk was still there, just as he remembered. Only now something lay between the river and the town, something he definitely didn’t remember: a thick, black tube that ran from horizon to horizon, held above the ground by steel support beams and looking like some gargantuan, unmoving snake. Aningan Kenojuak furrowed his brow; he still didn’t understand.

But then, Aningan Kenojuak had never heard of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline.

Living in self-exile, he had had no cognizance of the crisis that had befallen an energy-hungry America; no perception of the invading force of engineers, administrators, and construction workers that had moved through Alaska like a

swarm of army ants, stripping the environment clean and leaving in its wake a serpentine coil of steel and fiberglass, along with a scattering of instant cities to house that coil's keepers. Aningan had no way of knowing that his dreams of restoring the old ways had been sabotaged not by time, but by the low burble of fossil fuel, and the insidious grasp of dollar-a-gallon greed.

"You . . . you wait here, My Lord." The old medicine man waved a bony hand at his ice-bound companion, distractedly, his awe-widened eyes still staring at the town below. "I-I'll see . . . I mean, I'll find out . . . I . . ."

Aningan's trembling words faded, the sentence unfinished, as he began to skid down the slope toward the town. He couldn't or wouldn't take his eyes from the cinder-block buildings and so fell several times as he scurried, tripping and slipping on jutting rocks or patches of snow. On the rise behind him, Captain America hovered and seemed unconcerned.

The shaman slowed as he reached the town, passing through an alleyway and reaching out to the buildings on either side, hoping desperately that they were mere illusion, and would disappear when touched. They weren't, and didn't. Finally the old man stepped onto the sidewalk along the main street, and the reality of the situation hit him with the force of a doubled-up fist. From all sides he was bombarded by alien sights, sounds, and smells. People rushed, radios blared, garbage reeked. But the most appalling insult of all glared at him from across the mud-mired street, from above the single-storied structure that served as the town's post office. It was a simple, block-lettered sign that read, "Bantu Junction." *Junction?* Had his once proud and noble tribe come to this?

Aningan looked from side to side, fighting to control the turmoil writhing within his soul. There! Several buildings up the street! He saw what must have once been one of his

people, a young Eskimo man about twenty years old, loading large bags of cement from the sidewalk into the back of a battered pickup truck. The man was stocky, with fine, dark features, and whistled casually as he went about his task. Aningan shuffled forward as the man heaved the last bag in and closed the truck's loading gate. Then, placing a hand on the man's arm to get his attention, the shaman said, "Please. You must tell me what has happened! Th-This shouldn't be! It's not proper!"

The young man looked down at Aningan Kenojuak with a friendly smile. "Hey, pop, what's the matter? Got a problem?"

"This place is wrong. The village must be restored." The old medicine man spoke matter-of-factly, as if stating an obvious truth. "I've returned with the One True God and we must rid His sanctum of unbelievers, lest He leave us again. We must all bow down before Him and worship Him and He will bring back to us all that is good and simple and pure."

The young Eskimo's eyes rolled upward as he thought to himself, *Oh, Christ. A half hour late on my delivery schedule and I have to get pegged by a Jesus freak!* He then pushed gently past the old man and opened the cab door.

"Uh, look, pop, I'd really like to stay and listen, but they're building a new booster station down by the river and they can't finish the foundation without this cement. Some other time, huh?"

"B-But I'm so confused," Aningan insisted. "I need help "

"Ohhh, I get you." The young man nodded knowingly and reached into the pocket of his jeans, bringing out a dull silver coin which he placed into Aningan Kenojuak's outstretched hand. Then he climbed into the truck, started the engine, and slowly pulled away from the sidewalk, calling back as he left, "Have yourself a snort on me, old-timer. And give my regards to God!"

Puzzled, the shaman looked down at the tarnished metal disc in his hand, then let it drop to the mud. He didn't understand what his young kinsman had meant, but somehow it made him feel unsettled, and unclean. He had to do something. But what?

Looking around again, Aningan saw a white man in a plaid lumberjack coat coming from the front door of the largest building on the street, an official-looking structure with decals and seals in the corner of its modest picture window. Beside the building was a large, fenced-in yard which held a wide array of bulldozers and other construction vehicles, along with several stacks of oil drums containing diesel fuel for the machines. Aningan's village had been altered by white man's magic, and it was obvious that this was the point from which that magic had originated. Thus it was here that the aged wonder worker must make his demands.

Careful not to slip in the half-frozen mud, Aningan crossed the crude street, moving directly to where the white man from the official building was unlocking a gate to the equipment yard. Then, standing as straight and tall as his frail form would allow, he spoke with both dignity and courtesy.

"I insist, sir, that you return my village to me at once."

"Huh? Whazzat?" The man from the official building, who happened to be named Fritz Gardenia and happened to be field foreman for the Amrek Construction Company and happened to be thinking about his hemorrhoids, turned around. "You say somethin'?"

"I said, sir, that the village must be restored. The ice god has returned and this . . . this *place* is totally unsuitable for his worship. I'd like my village back now, please."

Fritz Gardenia raised his hands in exasperation, looking away. "Oh, Christ on a stick! Why do I get all the banana-brains? What am I, some sort o' freak magnet?" Then, to Aningan: "Look, Mac, I got me a bunch o' eco-nuts comin' to

examine the pipe, so I gotta check for leaks, y'unnerstand? I'm busy an' I'm tired so just lemme alone, 'salright?"

The irritable construction worker turned away, starting to push the gate open to enter the equipment yard. But Aningan Kenojuak reached forward, grabbing the man's woolen coat and holding him back.

"Wait! You have no right to take this land! No right to destroy a way of life that has existed for centuries! You must give it back, or the ice god will—"

Fritz Gardenia whirled around, breaking Aningan's grip and throwing the old man off balance, causing him to tumble backward into the mud of the street.

"Damn it, ya old fool!" the construction boss yelled, angrily. "I'm tired o' all you panhandlin' deadbeats. My company's brought more prosperity to this land than a thousand years o' your blubber huntin' an' fish peddlin', an' we ain't even asked for a 'thank you.' So I ain't gonna give ya this damn town an' I ain't gonna give ya no more o' my time. If ya want a handout, try the Salvation Army. Now beat it!"

Straightening his coat and wishing that he didn't have to sit on the hard seat of the company land rover all the way down to the river, Fritz Gardenia walked stiffly off into the equipment yard. Behind him, Aningan Kenojuak pulled himself up slowly from the mud. His eyes no longer sparkled, but burned with a dark, dangerous fire. All the years of loneliness welled up inside him. All the hours and minutes and eternities of worthless solitude filled his soul, mingling there with the shards of broken dreams and splintered hopes. They raced through his mind, cutting like a whirlwind of icy thorns, sending the blood pounding through his ancient body with a strength born of atavistic, animal rage.

He looked around, and saw that those few white men who even bothered to notice his plight did so with barely-

concealed grins of amusement. Aningan Kenojuak answered those grins with a snarl of clenched teeth as he reached with both hands to grab the gemstones around his neck and squeeze, and squeeze, and squeeze.

“No!”

Along both sides of the street, planks from the wooden sidewalks cracked and split and flew into the air, spinning and tumbling in erratic paths that caused the startled pedestrians to scramble for whatever shelter they could find.

“No!”

Like balloons left too long in the sun, the tires of the passing trucks and jeeps swelled and blew, sending mud spattering in all directions, and sending vehicles skidding out of control to crash into walls and each other.

“NO!”

As one, every window along the main road exploded outward, showering street, sidewalks, and passersby with sparkling stars of shiny, sharp glass.

Aningan looked at the pale faces that now gazed at him with the awe and respect he deserved. He looked around at the ugly, unpardonable town that he was about to destroy—and he smiled.

While in the distance, a glittering quinjet sped silently into view.

Seven

“Strap in, guys. It looks like we’ve hit some pretty heavy turbulence.”

The Beast struggled with the usually responsive control stick. Ever since they had spotted the town up ahead, the quinjet had been bucking and lurching as if caught in some invisible storm. In the copilot’s seat, the Scarlet Witch glanced over the control console with growing concern.

“I don’t like it, Beast. First we hit an air pocket that isn’t there, and now all the dials are spinning like someone was holding a magnet over them.”

“Yeah, I know,” answered the erstwhile Hank McCoy, “and I’ve got another bulletin for you: the engines are starting to cut out! Something tells me Grizzly Adams of the Yukon must be close by.”

Settled comfortably in one of the passenger chairs, his seat belt still rolled up in its retractable holder, Thor added, “Mayhap ’twould be wise to ground our craft and proceed afoot?”

“Not only would it be wise, Blondie,” the Beast now had both hands and one foot on the control stick, fighting it, “but I’d say it’s quite possibly our only hope for immediate survival! There’s a smooth patch of what I hope’s snow at the other end of town. I’m gonna try and set us down on it.

“Prayers in the names of Orville and Wilbur Wright will be gratefully accepted.”

Wobbling and canting like a kicked Frisbee, the malfunctioning quinjet angled low over Bantu Junction, then dipped even lower to come smacking down into a deserted field with a dull *WHUMP* and an impressive spray of snow, metal, and mud.

On the main street nearby, Aningan Kenojuak didn’t notice. His concentration was focused on a rise outside of town, a rise above which hovered his ice-imprisoned, unseeing god: Captain America.

“Do not fear, My Lord,” he said, a revitalized sense of purpose and destiny giving new strength to his voice. “The white man may not willingly remove his magic—but *I* may yet remove the fruits of that craven sorcery. Behold!”

Turning to face the equipment yard from which he had so recently been cast, the old Eskimo touched out a pattern on the String Of Stones; while in that yard, Fritz Gardenia stood beside a logging crane and wondered just what the hell was going on. He stopped wondering, however, when the crane suddenly shuddered and began to rumble forward of its own volition.

The crane was a massive thing, painted yellow and propelled by mighty treads that were fully as tall as an average man. It sported a latticework hoisting arm that was forty feet long, and ended in a dangling metal chain with a hook that was used for lifting or lowering heavy loads. And when it crashed through the steel-link security fence—leaving a hole through which the terrified Fritz Gardenia ran only seconds later—it began swinging that arm from side to

side, smashing it randomly into walls and roofs like a child in a tantrum.

Aningan Kenojuak looked pleased. “And now,” he said to whomever cared to listen, “to *cleanse* this blasphemy!”

Fingering a new sequence on the gemstones around his neck, the dark-eyed shaman mumbled a few whispered words, then nodded his head once. In the yard, the metal oil drums stacked neatly around the fence perimeter began to tremble, and then split apart in wide, gaping holes, spewing their uctuous contents high into the air. At their apex, the countless gallons of diesel fuel burst into flame, finally raining back down to earth in gouts of crackling orange fire that set the equipment yard ablaze, and scarred the sky with billows of roiling black smoke.

At the edge of town, the Beast clambered out the side door of the quinjet—which was now the top door, since the aircraft had tilted over onto its side at the end of his somewhat inglorious landing—and slid down the fuselage to join the other three Avengers.

“Uh, tell you what, guys—if you don’t tell the FAA about this, I won’t. Okay?”

No one answered the Beast. They were all looking to the town a short distance away, and to the soot-dark clouds that rose from its center.

“There canst be little doubt,” Thor said, “but that the one we seek doth lurk nearby. Wanda, Pietro, Beast—thou wilt search for the magician, Kenojuak, and for our stolen comrade, whilst I strive to douse yon base inferno.”

And so saying, the God Of Thunder thrust Mjolnir before him, letting the mallet’s mystic powers carry him aloft. In seconds, he was above the fiery equipment yard; in those same seconds, he knew what he must do. Thus grabbing Mjolnir by the leather thong at its heel, he began swinging the enchanted hammer in a circle over his head, faster, ever

faster, until at last the mallet swung at such great speed that it displaced the air within the area of its circumference, creating a vacuum that drew upward a great, whirling spout of snow from the empty expanse behind the yard. Then, tilting his spinning hammer much like a rodeo rope twirler, he angled the rising snowspout over toward the fire, stopping the hammer with predetermined precision to let the snow fall in a white, smothering blanket over the flames.

This had escaped Aningan Kenojuak's notice. For as soon as his cleansing conflagration had begun, he had turned to saunter casually down the main street, watching the driverless crane crash and slam into buildings, looking much like a man whose pet has learned a new trick. But the town had gotten over its initial shock, and was about to strike back. Led by a uniformed security guard, a dozen armed men ran from the construction-company office and stopped several yards from the strolling shaman.

"I don't know what you're doin', you sonofabitch," yelled the guard, bracing his pistol with both hands, "or how you're doin' it. But you'd better stop it right now or we're gonna blast your tail halfway to Seattle!"

Aningan looked at the men, an odd half smile on his face, as a familiar yellow-green glow spread from the String Of Stones to cover his body. "Do," was all he said.

The guard's finger pressed back on the pistol's trigger. "All right, boys, I'll take responsibility—*burn 'im!"*

Rifles and pistols cracked and bucked, spitting fire and lead at the elderly Eskimo only yards away. But none of the bullets struck their target; instead, they glanced off the pulsing glow as if they'd hit solid titanium steel, ricocheting in all directions. Unfortunately, caught up in bloodlust and the confidence that their firearms could drop anything that walked, the gunmen were unaware of this. Even when some of the stray bullets struck their own number, they refused to believe that they were only making noise.

To the three Avengers emerging from an alleyway a short distance down the street, however, the situation was all too obvious.

“Oh, my god!” cried the Scarlet Witch. “Those men don’t know what they’re up against. They’ll end up killing each other!”

“And if they don’t,’ added Quicksilver, “that rampaging machine will! It’s got no driver!”

Squatting next to the mutant siblings, the Beast suggested, “Look, folks, bullets and I don’t get along too well—they tend to leave annoying little holes in my body—so why don’t you two take care of those hotshots while I zip over and pull the plug on My Mother, The Crane, okay?”

With that, the Beast bounded off down the street, swinging from the occasional lamp post or flagpole for added momentum. Behind him, the Scarlet Witch blinked—and was alone. Realizing that Quicksilver was probably already in the middle of the fray, she ran down the sidewalk toward the one-sided gun battle.

Meanwhile, at the scene of that conflict, puzzled gunmen lowered their weapons, having finally noticed that their last few rounds had struck nothing, and that there was now an odd silver blur between them and their target. That blur stopped, and it was Quicksilver, holding out before him a double handful of copper-jacketed lead pellets that his incredible speed had enabled him to catch in midflight.

“Hey,” cried one of the construction men. “Ain’t that one of the muties that works for a superhero group back east?”

(Aningan Kenojuak had also recognized Quicksilver, and felt a subtle twinge of apprehension.)

“Yeah,” called another, “but what the Sam Hill’s he doin’ here?”

“I am trying to save you from your own folly,” answered Quicksilver. “The man you seek to slay has powers beyond

your ken, and you would be fools to continue your senseless aggression."

Huddled behind glassless windowpanes, the citizen of Bantu Junction watched the temporary lull in the war that had erupted on their streets. Then, with a voice calm and even, the security guard spoke.

"Look, superstar, out here we've learned to take care of our own, and that's exactly what we intend to do. Maybe we are fools, but if you don't get the hell out of our way, you're gonna be *dead!"*

The guard then raised his pistol—or at least tried to. For midway on its journey to eye level the weapon's barrel snagged on a shimmering, translucent wall that had suddenly appeared before the guard, a wall that quickly spread into a dome that covered his startled companions as well.

"It's called a hex sphere, gentlemen," said the Scarlet Witch as she came to stand beside her brother.

(Aningan's hand crept to the String Of Stones; his apprehension grew.)

"And," she continued, "if you try to shoot, cut, or walk through it, I think you'll probably find that task almost as easy as drinking tar through a straw."

Mercifully, the trapped gunmen's short and to-the-point comments on the witch's handiwork were muffled by the thick walls of the sphere.

"Excellent, Wanda," said Quicksilver. "With these spectators protected from themselves, we can concentrate on—"

"Oh, my stars and garters! *Whoooop!"*

The familiar expletive brought Wanda's and Pietro's heads around to gaze at the far end of the street. There, dangling from the chain in front of the very machine he had gone to stop, was the upended and exceptionally-embarrassed

Beast. Having deftly avoided the crane's swinging arm long enough to reach the machine's control booth, he had paused to figure out which among the numerous switches and levers would deactivate the rampaging juggernaut. Unfortunately, that had given the sentient mechanism enough time for its hook-tipped chain to snake into the control booth, wrap itself tightly around the Beast's ankles and yank the surprised Avenger back outside. Now, it drew its hoisting arm back, readying a swing that would smash the helpless Beast into a concrete wall like a fuzzy demolition ball.

"Quicksy! Wanda!" the Beast yelled. "G-Get me out o' this, will ya? I-I don't think the world's ready for a furry, blue pancake!"

Almost before the words had been said, Quicksilver began sprinting for the scene, followed at an expectedly slower pace by the Scarlet Witch. As they left, Aningan Kenojuak shuffled in his old man's way toward the far end of town, intent on gaining the side of the ice-god who hovered in sacred majesty beyond. He was worried. He hadn't counted on facing these super powered foes again, and this time he was without Brother Bear.

Meanwhile, the Beast had closed his eyes, and so didn't see Quicksilver arrive and begin running in a rapid, tight circle below him. But he soon felt the results of that tactic, as he was caught in the Silver Speedster's slipstream and started to spin, ever faster, the chain that held him twisting and knotting tighter and tighter until at last it snapped, sending the Beast falling in an awkward spiral to land in the mud below. Seconds later, the hoisting arm crashed into the previously-sound concrete wall of the local post office—sans Avenger.

Quicksilver skidded to a messy halt and dropped to one knee beside his freed comrade. "Beast! Are you hurt?"

“Let me put it this way, Quicksy,” said the Beast from a sprawled sitting position, “I don’t suppose you know how to put a splint on an ego, do you? Never mind, I’ll be okay—and thanks. Now let’s go give that nasty ol’ Avengernapper a lickin’ he’ll never forget!”

Full of natural enthusiasm, the Beast pulled himself to his feet and started walking. Unfortunately, the direction in which he walked was sideways, straight into a still-standing plasterboard wall. Finding himself once more on his increasingly bruised backside, the Beast drilled some mud out of an ear with his little finger and said sheepishly, “Ah, on second thought, maybe I’d better sit this one out.”

Moments before and blocks away, Thor had also heard the Beast’s initial cry. But as he had turned Mjolnir to fly in the direction of that yelp, confident that the oil fire had been duly suffocated, he was nearly singed as the flames erupted anew, burning *through* the covering snow, streaking even higher than before.

“ ’Tis some trick of sorcery!” the Thunder God said to himself. “Our wonder-working adversary must have conjured magical flames, unquenchable by methods either normal or natural. But mayhap wisdom and a solution may be found in an ancient mortal adage—that which doth advocate fighting fire with fire!”

Then the son of Odin took a flat-footed stance in midair, swinging his enchanted hammer high before him, and the sun died slowly before an onslaught of sudden black clouds.

Beneath the rapidly-darkening sky, the Scarlet Witch stood alone before the destructive behemoth that had once been an unpretentious loading crane. She saw Quicksilver tending to the Beast a short distance away and knew that it was now up to her to stop the rampaging machine’s demolition spree. Unfortunately, the supernaturally sentient machine must have sensed this as well, for it swerved and

dropped its latticed arm directly toward her. The distaff Avenger dove quickly to her left, leading the monster crane away from her friends, as the half-ton arm came smashing down into the muck of the street. Then, acting with reflexes honed by a lifetime of fighting for survival, she rolled back to her feet, muddy but alive.

Once again the crane raised its hoisting arm for a killing blow, but this time the Scarlet Witch struck first. Standing in a half crouch, she raised both hands in front of her. Then, with a high-pitched hum, concentric rings of violet-tinted hex force streamed from both hands to strike the ground beneath the crane, and almost immediately the massive machine began to sink. The hex was liquifying the normally-solid layer of permafrost beneath the street, turning one section of it into a veritable mire that drew the teetering crane down like a boulder in quicksand. When it was sufficiently buried, the Scarlet Witch thought, she would stop her hex, allowing the ground to resolidify and trap the deadly machine in a prison of frozen earth.

It was then that the shadow crossed her eyes and she looked up to see death only inches away. The angle at which the crane sank was bringing its arm down in an unexpected arc directly at her. Reacting instantly, she leaped to the side —and almost made it. The dropping arm struck her only a glancing blow, sending her skidding along the far sidewalk until she slowed to a stop, a rag doll in red, her only movement the measured rise and fall of breathing.

The skies had now darkened to a dusklike gloom, but Quicksilver could still make out the essentials of the tableau that lay spread before him: the deserted street, the quagmired crane, and the small, still form of his sister. For the second time in less than a day, someone had hurt Wanda. Only this time there was no one to stay him from his revenge. His narrowed eyes scanned the town, then beyond, finally settling on the old shaman as he stood beside some

shadowed monolith on a hill a hundred yards away. And in the second that followed that discovery, Quicksilver was halfway up that hill.

Aningan Kenojuak stood atop the rise from which he had first viewed the travesty that had once been his village. It had all gone sour, he thought, holding fast to the gemstone necklace that allowed him to watch Quicksilver, as if in slow motion, sprinting up the slope toward him. But there was still hope. Perhaps he could find another village, another people who would worship him—that is, worship his *god*—with the love and respect that was proper.

“Don’t worry, My Lord,” he said to the ice block beside him. “They have taken everything else from me, but they will not again take you.”

On the slope, something grabbed Quicksilver’s ankle. His speed instantly cut to a fraction of what it had been, the Avenger tumbled forward, fighting for balance as his palms hit the ground, digging grooves in the hard earth and patchy snow. When he looked to see what had stopped him, his surprise turned quickly to horror.

For slithering up from around rocks and beneath snow were long strands of fibrous, yellow-gray lichens. They had wrapped themselves tightly around both of Quicksilver’s feet and now moved upward, coiling around calves, knees and thighs like living ropes. Overcoming his initial shock, the Silver Avenger grabbed great handfuls of the fungoid mass and ripped them from his body, only to have each gap he made filled immediately by the advancing, grasslike tentacles. In a matter of seconds, he was completely covered by the animate lichens, bound so tightly that he couldn’t even tremble.

Aningan Kenojuak looked down his nose at the gray, grassy lump that had fallen less than an arm’s length away, and raised a single eyebrow.

“So there,” he said.

Meanwhile, the storm clouds continued to gather, centering above the Bantu Junction equipment yard in a mass so thick and black that it actually reflected the light from the fire below. While standing in the air midway between cloud and flame, Thor still swung his hammer, using his divine command of the elements to intensify the ever-building storm. Winds of hurricane force tore at his cape and long, pale hair; sheets of gusting rain rang from his metal helm and pelleted the exposed skin of his face and arms. Yet, incredibly, the entire tempest was confined to the squared-off perimeter of the equipment yard.

Thor stared down, and his scowl of concentration turned to a frown. If he was to prevent an even greater loss of property, and quite possibly life, he had to move rapidly. The oil-based fire—which had remained totally unaffected by the minature gale—had consumed everything in the yard and was beginning to spread to the adjacent buildings. It had to be now.

His features set with grim purpose. Thor brought his left hand up to grab his right, using both to stop Mjolnir’s swing and hold the mighty mallet straight up above his head. Then, without a heartbeat’s pause, he brought the hammer straight down, like a beacon pointing the way to the supernatural holocaust below. The results were as awesome as they were spectacular.

Like living things, the hovering clouds spasmed, groaning with a thunder that shook the very ground and thrusting forth a jagged finger of lightning so bright that it would shame the sun. The lightning struck the oil fire dead center, parting the flames as a stone tossed in a puddle, and for an instant there was the shuddering whine of occult forces clashing. Then, the battle was over. Several small eruptions rocked the compound, one after the other, and the entire equipment yard exploded in a searing geyser of rising fire. The geyser changed colors as it grew, running the gamut of

the rainbow, and at its peak shattered into a million splinters of kaleidoscopic flame, each no bigger than a man’s thumb; and each of which was easily doused by the still-falling rain before it had returned even halfway to earth.

The conflagration had ended.

With a tired, almost trivial gesture, Thor flicked his hammer—and the rain stopped. The clouds faded from black to gray to linen white, and then started to disperse. Once more, the sun shone on Bantu Junction.

And what Thor witnessed in that new light quickly changed his fatigue to anger. For besides the senseless destruction that had turned half of the small town to rubble, he saw the Beast sitting not far away, head in hands, disheveled and disoriented. Across the street from that he saw the beautiful and refined Scarlet Witch, now muddy and battered, slowly pulling herself to her knees. Rapidly surveying the entire area, he found the snow-spotted knoll upon which huddled the lichen-covered form that must be Quicksilver, and above which hovered the bizarrely ice-encrusted Captain America.

And atop which stood the elderly, parka-clad cause of it all.

Thor swung his hammer up to a strike popsition, and the sky trembled with residual thunder. “Prepare, base villain,” he spoke coldly, “to face the wrath of a *true* god!”

On the hill opposite, Aningan Kenojuak swallowed with some difficulty. Was there no *stopping* these vexing superheroes? With nervous fingers, he began touching out a familiar sequence on the facets of the stones about his neck, calling forth the pink carrier nimbus that would swiftly bear him and his precious ice-god away from possible danger.

But then he glanced over Thor’s shoulder, and all thoughts of prudent flight died. In their place there now

grew a hatred, instant and ancient, germinating from an agony that had been the old shaman’s sole companion for so many empty years. It was an agony, he suddenly realized with an almost electrical rush of anticipation, that would soon be paid for in full.

For the god-stealer had returned.

Eight

“Heimdall’s horn!”

Thor spat the Nordic oath instinctively, ducking his head low to the left. The figure that had just shot over his right shoulder had taken him totally by surprise, and that shock increased as he recognized the flying man to be Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner. Grimly, he wondered if the hot-tempered Atlantean had come to aid his cause, or that of his enemy. Deciding not to take chances either way, the Thunder God raised his hammer once again—only to receive a second surprise.

“No, Thor! Don’t!”

Turning to the electronically augmented cry, Thor saw Iron Man swooping in to join him, cutting boot jets to minimum thrust so that he floated, nearly vertical, a few feet away.

“Namor’s on our side,” Iron Man called, “at least for the moment.”

“Thine presence gladdens my heart, Iron Man, but thou knowest not the situation. Yon fiend hath already laid low

four of our number, and e’en the Prince of Atlantis cannot stand long before such uncanny power. I must fling mine hammer, lest—”

“You’re the mightiest among us, old friend,” Iron Man interrupted, “but your hammer didn’t stop Kenojuak before and there’s no reason to think it will now. But we learned a lot on our little pit stop in Atlantis and we’ve got a plan. So just sit back and let us handle this. Please!”

With that, Iron Man kicked his boot jets back to full thrust and took off, following Namor’s path across the battle-torn town. In his wake, Thor struggled with conflicting emotions. He was a hero, and as such wasn’t used to standing idly by while friends did battle, possibly to the death. But he was also a member of a team, and Iron Man was his leader, duly elected. Thus he remained standing in the air over the blackened equipment yard, gripping his enchanted hammer tightly in one hand and vaguely wondering where the Vision was.

On the low knoll beyond Bantu Junction, Aningan Kenojuak watched as his hated enemy sped through the air toward him. Immediately, he played the String Of Stones to cast a protective, yellow-green shield around his god, and then himself. His old eyes were eager—the longed-for battle had begun.

Namor struck with both fists extended, slamming them into the old magic man with a force like matched pile drivers. But the shaman didn’t move, didn’t stir, and Namor glanced off like a flat stone skipped on water.

“I know not why you’ve returned, defiler!” Aningan cried. “But I rejoice at your coming, for I am no longer helpless, and my god is no longer unprotected. This time it shall be you who will suffer, for the torment your casual act of petulance brought upon me, and for the degradation it brought to my people!

“This time, by the will of the ice-god and the power of the Blue Totem, you shall suffer! *And scream! AND DIE!”*

Namor turned in midair shortly after caroming off of his target. He was impressed. Incredible as it seemed, what Iron Man had told him about this ancient primitive appeared to be correct. Not that it mattered, of course. No human—magician or otherwise—could long stand against the one true Sub-Mariner!

Swooping low, Namor dug deep into the frozen earth, coming up almost immediately with a craggy, dirt-spotted boulder that must have easily weighed a quarter ton. This he cocked back in one hand, as if to hurl it with smashing finality at his adversary. But he never got to loose his deadly missile. For at that moment, Aningan Kenojuak stabbed a wizened finger at him and yelled, “Writhe!”

And suddenly, Namor was no longer free. The air around him, to a distance of some ten feet on any side, had congealed into a gelatinous, green-black mass. Immediately, his gas-breathing organs shut down and his internal gills came into play, straining to pull the jelly-like substance between their oxygen-absorbing folds. Namor’s ankle wings were also in trouble. The Atlantean was finding it almost impossible to flap in the newly-solidified environment, in a consistency that, nevertheless, kept him suspended in midair. Without thinking, Namor dropped the boulder and it drifted down through the mucusy mass, finally exiting with a slow, sucking *plop* before dropping to the ground below.

The Prince of Atlantis struggled, fighting to tear his way out of the cloying trap, but just when he seemed to be making some headway, the old shaman thrust his accusing finger forward once more, shouting, “Damnyoudamn*youdamnyouDIE!”* And the green-black blob constricted, shrinking to where it extended only six feet beyond the amphibian monarch.

Inside that compacted structure, Namor gasped. He felt no fear, but he suddenly felt a tremendous increase in pressure, greater than any he had experienced beyond the deepest reaches of his watery realm. Breathing became even more difficult, and movement itself slowed to a crawl. From the outside, the Sub-Mariner looked like a pale figure toiling in slow motion, as viewed through a lens smeared with green-black grease.

Standing on the hillock, Aningan Kenojuak frowned. What was this god-thief made of, anyway? Such pressure should have killed him long ago, crushed his lungs to pulp! Could the Totem have been wrong about the limits of his power? But, no. He couldn't fail now, not after all he'd been through.

Aningan pulled his arm back, then shot his pointing finger out one last time, screaming, "Diieeeeeee!" His lips were pulled back in a grimace, and his brow popped with rigid veins and beads of sweat. In the air before him, the oily dark clot that surrounded the Sub-Mariner shrunk once again, this time to a point that extended a mere two feet on a side.

Namor no longer struggled to escape his diminished prison. For when its size had decreased, the pressure inside had doubled, to an intensity beyond any he had ever endured. He was powerless, immobile . . . and his breathing had stopped.

But the spell was taking a toll on its caster, as well. For as Aningan poured all of his, and the String Of Stones' energy into the destruction of his enemy, the shielding glow surrounding his body began to flicker, and fade, and finally disappear. It was at this precise moment that Iron Man, who had been keeping out of the shaman's sight to the rear, dove in low, blasting the ground in front of the old Eskimo with both repulsors. The resulting spray/explosion of dirt, rock, and snow was blinding, and Aningan instinctively raised his arms to protect his face. Iron Man's pulse quickened as he yelled:

“Now!”

From the ground in front of the shaman, from the pit blasted by the repulsors, the transparent Vision rose like structured smoke. He had been in an ethereal form in the knoll from the beginning, awaiting Iron Man’s signal. Now, he extended a hand as he rose, solidifying it so that when it reached Aningan Kenojuak it grabbed the String Of Stones with crushing force, pulling and snapping the necklace’s cord and sending the glittering gemstones bouncing and scattering down the hill in all directions.

Immediately, the green-black glob around the Sub-Mariner vanished, allowing the semiconscious monarch to fall, gasping, to the ground. And had anyone been inside the toppled mountains at the entrance to the valley outside of Atlantis, they would have been surprised to see Brother Bear also disappearing at that same moment.

Aningan Kenojuak rubbed the grit from his eyes, blinked, and disbelieved. For played out before him he saw a tragic tableau: his enemy freed, his power destroyed, and his dreams tarnished, pocked and bleached as if left too long beneath an unkind sun. Slowly, he turned toward his ice-encrusted god, hands extended as if to show their emptiness, and tears began to overflow his eyes, sliding down the ancient crags of his face like salty shame.

“My Lord,” he said in a voice that was nearly a whisper, “I . . . I’m sorry.”

Then he fell to his knees, the backs of his hands resting on his thighs, his head tilted up and to one side, his eyes tightly shut, and he cried. His frail body trembling with the release of emotions that should have died a decade ago, he cried.

Gathered around him, four mighty heroes—Iron Man, Thor, the Vision, and the still-slightly-stooped-over Sub-Mariner—saw Aningan Kenojuak not as a raving madman, not as a deadly engine of occult enmity, but as what he really, and finally, was—a tired, broken old man.

“It isn’t melting, Iron Man. Not a drop.”

Inside his gold-and-crimson armor, Tony Stark listened to the Scarlet Witch, and worried. It had been half an hour since they had defeated Aningan Kenojuak; half an hour since they had brought the ice block containing the inert Captain America into the office/jail of Sheriff Lee Cordell, placing it in front of a hissing radiator and positioning several portable electric heaters around it in a semicircle. And in the half hour that the ice block had sat bathed in enough heat to slow-bake an apple pie, it had remained as solid, as glistening and unchanged, as it had on the frost-covered knoll outside.

The Scarlet Witch rose from her kneeling position beside the block, delicately daubing perspiration from her forehead with a Kleenex, and stepped from the semicircle of direct heat. It wasn’t much cooler anywhere else in the room, she thought. The jail was small, officially furnished with desks, wanted posters, and rifle racks, and was obviously built to comfortably house two men—Sheriff Cordell and his single deputy, Kurt Turnbull—as well as the occasional apprehended malefactor. Now, however, the building was crowded, not only with sheriff and deputy, but also an old Eskimo shaman, five super-heroes, two construction-company paramedics who served as Bantu Junction’s hospital and emergency service, and a three-by-seven-foot block of unmelting ice. The only one missing was the Vision.

The cause of the synthezoid’s absence was a matter of courtesy. Moments before, he had stepped outside to act as the Avengers’ representative in seeing off the departing Sub-Mariner. That such an action was mere formality had been evidenced by the fact that neither party had spoken as the Prince of Atlantis had taken to the air and flown swiftly southward. Neither had asked for gratitude; neither had given it.

In all, it had been a rather somber leaving, and as such was indicative of the general atmosphere prevailing in the aftermath of the recent battle. Though the Avengers had emerged clearly victorious, that triumph had soon taken on an oddly unsatisfying flavor. At the beginning, they had reacted as might be expected: reveling in the hardy gusto of conquest, and in the joy of knowing that none of their number had been seriously hurt. But then they had taken Captain America to the sheriff's office—the sheriff having just returned from settling an altercation at one of the outlying pipeline repair sites—and the explanations had begun. As minutes had passed and mud had been scraped from dirty costumes, pieces of the puzzle had been put together, and the full story of Aningan Kenojuak's despair, loneliness, and almost childlike faith had come to light. And the Avengers had found it more and more difficult to look with anger at the old Eskimo who had such a short time ago tried to destroy them all.

Their antipathy had been so blunted that when officials from the Amrek Construction Company had finally found the courage to come complaining about the destruction of their property, Iron Man had simply told them that his employer, Stark International, would pay for all damages. The officials had then left, their pomp turned to eager consultation, and Tony Stark had noted wryly that they were undoubtedly discussing the most practical way of including a half dozen previous losses on the bill they would soon be sending him. But that didn't matter much, he thought now as he looked over at the bent old man sitting on a wooden bench, head lowered and hands clasped loosely in his lap. Aningan Kenojuak had suffered enough.

Sheriff Cordell, a mustachioed, middle-aged man in law-enforcement khakis, pulled his considerable bulk from behind his desk and moved past the nervous-looking paramedics to stand near Iron Man. Looking across at the

unmelting block of ice, he shook his head and said, “It just ain’t natural, y’know? I been workin’ this territory for over twenty years, since before ol’ Seward’s Folly was even a state. An’ one thing I’ve learned to hold as gospel in all that time is that when you put heat to ice, it melts. But that hunk o’ stuff your buddy’s trapped in, well, like I said . . . it ain’t natural.”

“Sheriff,” replied Iron Man, “I’m afraid you’re right.”

“I . . . I am?” Lee Cordell was obviously pleased with himself. He was the sheriff of a small wilderness town that had been invaded by bizarre manifestations and superpowered legends, and quite frankly he didn’t know what the hell was going on. But he was absolutely delighted to think that he *looked* as if he did.

Iron Man continued. “My armor’s sensor system has just completed an analytical scan of the substance coating Captain America, and that block isn’t quite ice. Near as I can tell, it’s more like some form of solidified energy. It shares certain similarities with the protective glow that Mr. Kenojuak used on himself and the giant bear he sent against us. But this material is solid, and apparently quite a bit more permanent. I’ve little doubt that I could hit it with full repulsor blasts for a week and not make a crack in its surface.”

“Holy geez, Shellhead,” called the Beast from where he hung, upside down, from the bars of one of the jail cells. “We gotta do something. The Fourth of July just won’t be the same without Cap!”

“Your humor is questionable, Beast, but your sentiment is accurate.” Quicksilver had moved from a corner to stand next to Iron Man—though at such a speed that neither paramedics nor lawmen had seen him move. They silently decided not to mention it to one another.

“Captain America could be dying inside that block!” Quicksilver continued. “It is our responsibility to free him,

and if our powers are useless against the substance that entraps him," he turned his steely stare toward Aningan Kenojuak, "then perhaps we would do well to direct those powers at that prison's creator!"

"Pietro!" Wanda's voice was stern as she took a step toward her brother. "What are you suggesting, that we take out our anger on Mr. Kenojuak? Why, without his powers, he's nothing but a misguided old man. How can you even think—"

Pietro put his hands on his sister's shoulders. "Oh Wanda, Wanda, you always were so naïve. That's why you need my protection. I wasn't proposing retribution—merely persuasion. One of our members' life is in jeopardy, and surely you agree that we must do everything we can to save him? Everything, no matter how unpleasant or barbaric it may seem. We are, after all, only human."

"Some of us are."

The hollow tones seemed cold, even in the stifling heat of the jailhouse, and all eyes turned to see the desolidified Vision stepping through the door—through the closed door. Instinctively, Sheriff Cordell's hand went to the Magnum bolstered at his hip, then relaxed. Deputy Turnbull, a younger man, merely sat on the corner of his desk and cracked a smile—hot damn!—while the two paramedics wished they were in Bali—or Akron—or anywhere.

Restoring his mass to its normal state, the Vision resumed. "I agree that violence is a very human trait, but perhaps in this instance it can be avoided. Our common concern seems to be the restoration of Captain America, and I believe that I've uncovered evidence that may allow us to attain that goal through intelligence and reasoning."

Quicksilver's eyes narrowed as the Vision added, "When I first tore the String Of Stones from Kenojuak's neck, my tactile sensors registered an anomaly: the jewels were far heavier than is normal for solidified mineral ornamentation.

That fact triggered traces of memories that were wiped from my cicuits in my initial confrontation with the entity known as Brother Bear. Thus I returned to the knoll where we defeated that creature's master and I examined the shaman's broken necklace. This is what I found."

The Vision extended a hand, opening fingers to reveal several cracked and chipped remnants of the String Of Stones. The other Avengers looked at them, their eyes slowly widening with realization, and then Iron Man stepped forward, taking one of the broken crystals somewhat awkwardly in his metal-gloved hand and holding it up to his eye slits for closer inspection. What he saw astonished him: inside the ostensibly crude religious adornment were strands of plastic-covered wire, miniature relays, and what could only be tiny soldered circuit patterns.

"Electronics!" Iron Man exclaimed, cybernetically signaling for a magnifying lens to slide down over his right eye slit. Quickly, he scanned the interior of the cracked gemstone, analyzing his observations with the acumen of one of the world's foremost electronics experts. "These circuits look like . . . yes, they are! They're key components of an amazingly miniaturized data-processing system. And the program elements are linked to touch-sensitive plates just below the facets of the gemstones, making the entire String Of Stones one ultrasophisticated, camouflaged computer keyboard!"

The Scarlet Witch stepped forward. "Then that's why Mr. Kenojuak kept handling the necklace while he fought us. He was actually *programming* his attack!"

"So it seems, Wanda," Iron Man said. "And I'll bet that there's some sort of energy converter—probably solar in nature—among the other components, along with a focusing mechanism that projected that energy to create the menaces that were sent against us."

“That would be one wager you would undoubtedly win, Iron Man.” The Vision spoke. “For it now occurs to me why my initial attempt to disrupt the creature called Brother Bear must have failed. When I first thrust my desolidified arm into his body, I must have sensed immediately that our foe was but a physical manifestation of energy, without real substance. That would account for my uttering ‘It . . . it isn’t . . .’ There was nothing solid for me to disrupt, but before I could withdraw, Brother Bear must have sent a surge of his own energy substance through my input channels, overloading my data circuits and burning out part of my memory core. Thus I was unable to warn you that we were not battling the supernatural, but science of an awesomely high order!”

Iron Man clutched the broken crystal in his hand, feeling frustrated. *Just when we’ve got one puzzle all sewn up,* he thought, *another pops up to take its place! Oh, well, no one ever said that being a superhero was a nine-to-five proposition. It would be nice to get something for overtime besides bags under the eyes though.* He turned and walked over to the slump-shouldered shaman.

“Mr. Kenojuak?”

The old Eskimo didn’t stir.

“Mr. Kenojuak!”

“Eh? What?” The ancient head rose slowly, but its rheumy eyes didn’t see Iron Man. If anything, they were focused inward, looking, perhaps, for a lost soul. His own.

“What do you want?”

Even in his frustration, Iron Man found it difficult to keep the stern edge to his voice. “For starters, I’d like some answers. Like for instance,” he held out the split gemstone, “what is a tradition-bound tribal shaman like you doing with a highly complex electronic device like this?”

“What . . . ?” The old eyes swiveled in their sockets, finally coming to rest on the crystal in Iron Man’s hand. “Oh. The String Of Stones. Why, that was a gift from the Blue Totem, of course.”

“Of course. Only who the hell is the ‘Blue Totem’?”

“I think he has a show on Channel 9 Saturday mornings,” offered the Beast.

“Shut up, Hank,” the Scarlet Witch offered back.

But Aningan Kenojuak paid no attention, turning his eyes back to their inner focal point, staring through a gauze curtain of memories and speaking slowly. “It’s really quite simple. For years, I did little else but pray aloud, calling to whatever powers would listen, recounting the tragedy of the Great Sorrow and pleading for assistance in gaining my revenge. Then, only days ago, I was astonished when a marvelous manifestation appeared before me in my igloo. It was a creature of great power, whom I later came to know as the Blue Totem.

“The Totem said that he had been following the flow when he heard my prayers. He was intrigued by my mention of a god dressed in red-white-and-blue robes and then I explained the tale to him fully, he seemed . . . ecstatic. He then left me for but a second, and when he returned he brought with him the String Of Stones. This he gave to me and instructed me in its use, teaching me the patterns that would conjure forth Brother Bear, the glow of protection, and the rest. He also told me of how the ice-god had been corrupted by . . . by a cult of evil Caucasians who called themselves the Avengers. He said that I would have to destroy them—you—first if I was to retrieve my god and restore him to his former glory. The Totem then left, returning to the flow, wishing me good fortune and laughing as if at some personal joke. I could only assume that he was a totem of great mirth, for I could certainly see nothing humorous in the situation.”

Neither, apparently, could any of the Avengers. For even with the hissing radiator and the humming electric heaters, the atmosphere in the Bantu Junction Sheriff's Office had turned suddenly chill. Iron Man had stiffened, his body as rigid as a girder, and his voice was measured and even when he spoke.

"Mr. Kenojuak, just what did this 'Blue Totem' look like?"

The old shaman's eyebrows pulled closer to each other, as if gently straining to draw a certain memory into clearer focus. "He was . . . strong. Very strong. Though of a size only somewhat larger than a man, he radiated a power that was awesome to behold. It took the form of a golden nimbus that covered him head to foot and, even without asking, I knew that he could crush me with but the most insignificant flex of his smallest finger. His raiments were loose, his helm was metal and both were colored in shades of muted green and deep purple. And his face, from which I derived his name, was as blue as a summer sky."

"Oh, my God!" The Scarlet Witch's voice was little more than a whisper. For the chill inside the office had given way to tension, an invisible spark that flickered and skipped between the six silent heroes like mad fire. The Beast dropped to his feet, taking an uncharacteristically subdued stance on the wooden floor.

"Uh, I don't suppose, Shellhead, that when the old guy says 'flow,' he means . . . 'time stream'?"

"I'm afraid, Beast, that that's exactly what he means." The tension was still there, but Iron Man's shoulders now sagged. He was tired; they were all tired. And all any of them wanted was to free Captain America and return to Avengers Mansion for some sleep, or maybe a cup of Jarvis' medicinal coffee. But the description was clear, the evidence undeniable. And it was cruelly obvious that instead of rest and relaxation, the Earth's mightiest heroes would very probably soon be embroiled in a struggle not only for

Captain America, not only for their own lives, but for the very future of the human race!

Iron Man sighed, and with that sigh put the apprehension and anxiety felt by them all into a single word.

“Kang.”

Nine

“Just who the hell is this Kang fella, anyway? And why should he cause such a sweat among you folks? I mean, good God! You’re the *Avengers!”*

Sheriff Cordell was seated behind his desk once again, puzzled. In these unsettled times, there were few things one could count on with any degree of certainty—death, taxes, his pension, and the Avengers, to be exact—and when any one of those things seemed shaken, he was shaken.

“Why don’t you just find this joker,” the sheriff continued, “and stomp his butt into the ground?”

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy, Sheriff,” Iron Man answered. He was sitting across the room at Deputy Turnbull’s desk, the top of which was scattered with the dismantled remains of various electronic apparatus: a two-way radio, a digital calculator, a color TV brought in from Burton’s Bar across the street and even Sheriff Cordell’s brand-new Joe Namath-autographed hair dryer. Iron Man had pirated parts from the appliances and was combining them with bits and pieces

from the elements of the broken String Of Stones, soldering the connecting points with the variable-intensity laser that was an integral part of the index finger of his right gauntlet. The device he was constructing was an odd-looking pastiche of circuits and transistors, and was about the size of a package of cigarettes.

Kurt Turnbull stood watching beside the desk, a fixed smile on his face, occasionally shaking his head in appreciation and emitting low *shhh* sounds.

The electric heaters had been turned off as an admitted failure, and the room was cooler now. It was also quieter. At the front of the office, Thor stood looking out a window, evidencing the patience of a god. While nearby, Wanda sat gracefully in an uncomfortable, straight-backed chair, flanked on either side by the fidgeting Quicksilver and the solemn Vision. The Beast had returned to the bars of the jail cell and was straddled across them, looking like a furry, blue spider traversing a window screen. The paramedics had been gratefully dismissed and were currently filling the gap left by the TV at Burton's Bar.

"To begin with," Iron Man resumed, "finding Kang is a lot harder than it sounds. Not only could he be anywhere in the world by now, but he could be anywhere in *time* as well!"

"Uhhhhh," said Sheriff Cordell. He was sure Iron Man probably made sense, but *what* sense he didn't know. He also didn't know how to pretend that he did know.

The Scarlet Witch sensed the sheriff's imminent embarrassment and spoke up. *(Saved by the belle,* Cordell thought.)

"You see, Sheriff, Kang isn't like any of our more ordinary mortal foes. In fact, he may not even be mortal at all anymore, at least as we know the term. Kang is a once-human creature who holds absolute mastery over space and time. Unfortunately, he also happens to be hopelessly insane. And he's beaten us before."

Lee Cordell sat forward in his chair, rubbing one of his chins between thumb and forefinger, and put on his best expression of official interest. In a back corner of his mind, he wondered vaguely if urine stains could be removed from khaki.

“Kang was a scientist born in the year 3000,” Wanda continued. “Or he will be born then—it gets rather confusing. Nevertheless, by utilizing the extremely advanced science of his era, both legal and forbidden, he was able to develop a mechanism that would breech the time barrier. He immediately began moving forward in time, only to find that for some inexplicable reason, he couldn’t travel past the fortieth century. Even when he used fortieth-century science to refine his temporal abilities to the point where they were incorporated into his own biochemical makeup, eliminating the need for mechanical time-travel devices, he still couldn’t push beyond the year 3999. And so he turned to the past—and there his madness began.”

At the deputy’s desk, Iron Man soldered a last connection on the makeshift device before him and cybernetically shut off the minilaser. Then, giving the object a last quick inspection, he set it down and turned to listen, along with the others, to Wanda’s tale.

“Apparently,” she spoke in soft, clear tones, “there is that in time travel which is the equivalent of what we call ‘jet lag.’ And as Kang made his journeys between past and future with ever-greater frequency, he became more and more disoriented, until at last the only reality he knew was the only constant he knew—himself. He began thinking of himself as some sort of deity, a being far superior to any of the lowly creatures he observed either in the past or future. And indeed, with his genius and his science, he was very nearly correct.

“Finally, he determined to exercise the growing power he felt. He journeyed to ancient Egypt, where he proclaimed

himself Pharaoh Rama-Tut and sought to rule that era of time. It was only through the intervention of another superhero group, the Fantastic Four, that he was prevented from doing just that. Nevertheless, he had gotten a taste of rule, and he wanted more.

“Taking the name of Kang the Conqueror, he set about masterminding the greatest conquest of all—that of time itself! His war to rule time has included the Avengers in its skirmishes several times in its course, in different eras and under different circumstances. And in each instance we have succeeded in thwarting Kang’s plans only with increased difficulty. The last time, Kang won . . . and was only defeated, at last, by the instability of his own mind. For, sensing that we could not prevail, we baited Kang until his desire to destroy us utterly superseded his thirst for conquest. He then expended so much energy toward that end that his power sources were exhausted, and he was forced to flee through time. We barely survived that incident—and I’m not at all certain that we would be so fortunate a second time.”

Sheriff Cordell at last understood the uneasiness that smothered the jail; he felt it himself, now. For if there was anything in the world dangerous enough to scare the Avengers, it was damned well dangerous enough to scare him!

“Then this Kang joker gave Kenojuak all that power just to get at you guys through Captain America, huh? Y-You don’t suppose that means he’s gonna start another battle for time, do yuh? Like, uh, f’r instance . . . here?”

Iron Man stood up and pushed his chair back under the desk. “We don’t know, Sheriff. And it looks as if the only way we’re going to find out is to find Kang and inquire as to his intentions.”

“Huh? But I thought you said he could be anywhere in all space an’ time; that he’d be impossible to find.”

“I said *hard* to find, Sheriff, not *impossible.* Thor has the power to whip up a time vortex with that hammer of his—”

(“Bein’ a god has its advantages,” the Beast quipped.)

“—and with it he can transport all of us to either the past or the future. With that mobility, we can use this,” he held up the hand-sized electronic hodgepodge he had been working on, “to track Kang down. It’s a crude location that I tinkered together, and is set to home in on the same type of energy that was used to power the String of Stones. Hopefully, Kang uses the same power source to run all of his devices. With a little luck, his advanced science has made that source unique enough that the locater can track it through all of the conflicting energy fluxes we’ll probably encounter in the time stream.”

“And if luck isn’t with you?” Sheriff Cordell queried.

“In that case, Sheriff . . .” Iron Man looked across the room, at the block-of-ice-that-wasn’t-a-block-of ice, and his next words were barely audible over his microspeakers. “In that case, I guess we’ve lost Captain America forever.”

Moments later, the curious crowd that had formed outside of the Bantu Junction Sheriff’s Office parted, allowing the building’s occupants to move past them to the street beyond. Sheriff Cordell and Deputy Turnbull stayed with the spectators on the sidewalk while the seven Avengers—with the Beast carrying the block-bound Cap over one shoulder—proceeded to a point in the center of the muddy street, and stopped.

Some of the watchers grumbled at the part the Avengers had played in the chaos that had so recently beset their normally quiet town; others grumbled that they couldn’t get close enough to get a good look at the only honest-to-gosh superheroes they were likely to see in their lives. Deputy Turnbull signed autographs.

Then, the colorfully clad heroes formed a tight circle, shoulder to shoulder, their backs to its center where Thor stood tall, hammer raised over his head. The Beast winked at the onlookers—“See ya!”—and then Thor began swinging the mystic Mjolnir in a very specific arc above him, its path forming what looked like an inverted cone of blurry speed. Beneath that cone, the Avengers began to blur as well, as if one were looking at them through the radiant heat rising from a desert blacktop.

And then, quite simply, they were gone.

Sheriff Cordell blinked—again. For the first time, he wondered if he should have gotten a written guarantee for payment from Iron Man for the damages done to the town. *Oh, well,* he thought, *if you can’t trust a superhero, who can you trust?* He turned to the crowd and gestured.

“All right, folks, the show’s over. You can go on about your business now.”

Between them, the sheriff and his deputy soon cleared the sidewalk, and stood before their office door taking one last look at the spot where, only minutes earlier, the Earth’s mightiest heroes had left on a quest of nearly incomprehensible danger. Behind them, other eyes also watched; eyes that were pale and rheumy and moist with tears; eyes that were set in a deep-brown face pressed against a window, a face that was drawn with the weight of loss.

“Good-bye,” Aningan Kenojuak said, softly.

Ten

Reality was a patchwork soup. It flowed and melted around the time vortex in ever-alternating patterns of color and form, as decades of change and movement occurred in the relative space of seconds. Inside the vortex, the Avengers watched the history flux that surrounded them. Some had traveled through time with Thor previously; for others, this was their first such trip. For all, it was an awesome experience.

The Beast held Captain America's ice block close, as much out of nervousness as a desire to keep them both within the time cone created by Thor's whirling hammer. Without turning his head, he called back to the Thunder God.

"Hey, Blondie, you sure you know where we're going? I mean, that mess out there looks like a Timothy Leary finger painting. Upside down!"

"Concern thyself not, Hank McCoy," answered Thor. "Piloting the stream of time is but a small matter for one who was trained beyond the Rainbow Bridge of Asgard."

“Yeah,” said the Beast, less than reassured, “but it’s scary as hell for one who was trained beyond the 59th-Street Bridge of Queens!”

Iron Man looked down at the locater in his hand. A small, amber light on its surface had begun to blink, coinciding with a low, electronic *ping* coming from its interior.

“How far have we come, Thor?” he asked.

“We’ve just passed the thirty-sixth Century, Iron Man, and are rapidly approaching the thirty-seventh.”

“Then you’d better start slowing us down. I’m getting a reading on Kang’s energy mode. Be ready to stop when I give the word.”

Subtly, the Avengers’ awe gave way to expectation, and they turned from the kaleidoscopic display around them to look at Iron Man. The Golden Avenger, however, kept his eyes on the locater’s signal light, which was now blinking with greater frequency. “Slower,” he said. The tiny amber bulb was flickering like a strobe light now, and the *pinging* sound was an almost constant tone. “Slowerrrr . . . and . . . *now!”*

Instantly, Thor stiffened his grip on Mjolnir, stopping the mallet in midswing. Almost as quickly, the time vortex faded, and nausea filled the Avengers’ throats with liquid lumps as the world racked in and out of focus around them. Finally, the world settled—more so than certain stomachs—and Thor spoke in a majestic baritone.

“Behold, my friends, the year 3900—threshold of the fortieth century!”

The twentieth-century heroes looked around, eyes wide—and were just a little disappointed. They hadn’t really known what to expect, but after countless viewings of *Star Wars* and its equally countless competitors they would have been less than astonished to find the Earth covered with idyllic, pastel-shaded minarets, or dark, ray-blasted battlements

dotted with laser turrets, or even still-smoldering ruins scattered over a wasted countryside.

What they found instead looked for all the world like a gigantic shopping mall.

They stood on a blushing-pink concourse that must have stretched for miles, branching off at intervals into smaller, equally pink walkways. Lining the street on either side were single- and multi-story buildings built of the same substance as the street, and colored in tastefully-complimenting shades. Molded benches, chairs, fountains, and even trees and animals sprouted from the walkways, sometimes matching the color of the area from which they grew, other times flowing into a contrasting hue.

Most of the buildings were fronted by large picture windows that displayed generally unfamiliar merchandise, as well as signs in passably recognizable English proclaiming prices and services: “Special Sale! Yesterday’s Air—Half Off!” “Skidders Tuned, Ears Waxed. Discounts to Veterans.” “Flig Job, 20 Creds. Lubricant Extra.”

Quicksilver kneeled down and tapped the pink walkway with a fingernail, scowling. “Plastic. Everything is plastic. There’s not a blade of grass, not a bit of metal anywhere.”

The Scarlet Witch hugged herself as she looked around. “No, it’s not exactly how I’d pictured the future.”

“George Lucas’d puke,” added the Beast.

Iron Man, ever the conscientious leader, stepped forward. “I think we’d best save the discussion of future shock for later, folks. Right now we’ve still got a job to do. The locater has, we can assume, brought us to Kang’s general time period and locale, but we’re going to have to fill in the details on the gentleman’s whereabouts ourselves.”

“Then perhaps,” the Vision joined in, “it would be wise to query one of the local inhabitants. Kang’s presence is

seldom a subtle one. Meanwhile, I shall see what I can discover by other methods."

So saying, the Vision desolidified, arched forward and sank down through the hard plastic walkway like a diver cleaving the ocean's surface.

"Sheesh!" said the Beast, shuddering slightly. "I know the Vizh is supposed to be a humorless 'droid, but I'll bet pesos to pizza that he gets a helluva kick pullin' that fadeout stunt."

Wanda just smiled.

"Maybe so, Beast," Iron Man said, "but he did have a point. Though if Kang is around, the locals certainly don't seem upset about it."

Indeed, the several dozen people who could be seen strolling along the plastic avenue seemed totally unconcerned—about anything. Some had already passed the gaudily garbed Avengers with no more reaction than an occasional beatific smile. Of course, the fact that the strollers were even more ostentatiously attired than the Avengers may have had something to do with that circumstance. For whereas pastel simplicity appeared to be the ruling mode in architecture, personal fashion seemed to follow a style that could only be called "outré chic."

Women's dresses were pointed at the sides, ankle length, rising to form inverted V-shaped slits at the front and back, reaching to several inches above the knees. Oddly enough, the men's pants legs followed this same pattern, making the entire lot look as if they were wearing well-tailored hand-me-downs. Short capes over brightly-colored tunic tops were favored by both sexes, and gloves, belts, and boots were fashioned from a wide variety of synthetic animal parts—plastic reptile skin, cellulose bird feathers, and even genuine imitation-vinyl ivory. Their jewelry was trash.

Actually, the term “trash” was relative, since throughout history one generation’s garbage has often become the next generation’s treasures. In this case, the treasures were centuries-old antiques. For example, one woman wore a necklace of colorfully decorated aluminum disks with matching crimped edges— They had once sat regally atop bottles of Coca Cola. Another stylish lady had her hair pinned up with a blue- and white-plastic ballpoint embellished with tiny golden arches and inscribed with the legend, “We do it all for you.” A gentleman stroller apparently believed in matching his adornments, for his cylindrical, copper-and-black belt buckle was nearly identical to the head of the slender plastic cane he twirled as he walked. Both were polished to a high gloss, and the faded lettering on each could still be made out to read, “Duracell.”

Iron Man looked around for a likely informant, and spotted one moving along the concourse toward them from the right. The man must have been at least ninety years old, but looked exceedingly fit and spry. He wore a bright-mauve split-legged jumpsuit with yellow piping, and his pale-green hair flowed down to his shoulders. His only jewelry consisted of four antique Budweiser beer cans that had been cut open and then reformed around wrists and ankles as bracelets.

The man was riding what looked to be the fortieth-century equivalent of a motorcycle: a six-foot-long plastic tube, approximately a foot in diameter, with two saddlelike seats and a set of handlebars at the front. A funnel-shaped device extended from below the tube to a point several inches above the street, and was apparently the source of the vehicle’s ability to float at that height as it moved forward with a *psh-psh-psh-psh* sound. The old man was traveling at modest speed, and slowed to a stop as Iron Man flagged him down.

“Hiya, sonny, my name’s Mauler. What can I do for ya?”

“I’d be very grateful if you could give us some information, sir. We’ve come a great distance looking for someone, and we were hoping that you might be able to tell us where he is.”

“Sure, sonny, I’d be happy to. What’s the gent’s na— Hey! Is that . . .” The green-haired man bent forward, looking at Iron Man with squinting eyes and rising interest. “. . . is that metal you’re wearin’? I mean, real, honest-to-Bogey *metal?”*

“Well, uh, yes it is, actually,” Iron Man answered a bit cautiously. “A highly-sophisticated alloy mesh, to be exact.”

“Hot Spam!” The old man slapped his aluminum-clad wrists together in exuberance. “I didn’t know there was that much genuine hard stuff in this whole sector. You must’ve really hit it lucky at the poppo tables to be able to afford somethin’ like that!”

“The . . . ? Oh, uh, yes. That’s exactly what happened.” Iron Man finally realized what the old man was talking about. The Beast, perched in a handstand on a nearby plastic replica of a giant bunny rabbit, also caught on—but wasn’t quite so demure in his realization.

“Holy geez!” he called. “Metal must’ve been so used up over the centuries that even old throwaways have become valuable!”

“Well, of course they have,” answered the ancient biker. “Everyone knows that. You act like you’ve never been to Earth before. You a Jupiter Convert or somethin’?”

Iron Man answered for the Beast. “Actually, we’ve all come from rather far away. And we’re not familiar with all of the local customs just yet.”

“Oh. That’d explain it then.”

“Explain what?”

“Why, your blue friend’s goin’ overboard. Everybody knows that toop is all the rage, but ya gotta admit that’s a bit much!”

“Toop?” asked the Beast. “What’s toop?”

Mauler sighed patiently. “Toop is toop. Ya know, fuzz? Rug? Brain grass? Like this.” The fortieth-century biker reached a thin hand up to grasp his hair, then lifted the green mop to reveal a shiny, totally-bald pate beneath. “M’self, I’ve always thought that skin was beautiful. Thought so ever since everyone’s hair fell out durin’ that problem they had with the ozone layer, oh, generations ago. But I guess people will always be vain.” He readjusted the pale-green toupee on his head and looked sideways at the Beast. “Some more than others, I reckon.”

The Beast placed both hands on his furry chest and, in his best Steve Martin voice, said, “Well, excuuuuuse me!”

The old biker grinned. “Sure, sonny. Think nothin’ of it.”

Cutting off the Beast’s less-than-amiable response, Iron Man broke in. “Er, about that man we’re looking for. I realize that you probably won’t be able to give us any specific information, but maybe you can give us enough clues so that we can hunt him up ourselves. His name’s Kang, though he may have—”

“Oh, sure. Kang.” Mauler pointed back down the street in the direction from which he’d come. “Ya go down five walks, spin a right, an’ go seven more walks. Then turn left an’ ya can’t miss it.” He twisted a dial on the handlebars of his bike and started *psh-pshing* down the street. “So long. Have a nice day. An’ don’t take no wooden creds, y’hear?”

For a moment, the Avengers watched the venerable biker riding away, one or two of them noting the embroidered baby-blue skull and crossbones on the back of his jumpsuit; then the Beast spoke.

“Boy, talk about *clues!”*

“Bah!” Quicksilver added. “This is insane!”

“Aye,” said Thor, “but so, then, is our quarry. We must take care. This widespread knowledge of Kang’s

whereabouts could be but bait for a deadly snare."

Iron Man turned to look up the street. "I agree with Thor. We have to be careful—but we also have little choice but to push on. You can bet Kang's not sitting still."

"But shouldn't we wait for the Vision?" the Scarlet Witch asked, as much reason as concern in her voice.

"Why?" countered Quicksilver, walking past his sister to join Iron Man. "I should think that he would be quite at home in this world of unfeeling plastic. If I were you, I'd be neither surprised nor disappointed if he never returned."

"Of all the—" Wanda began, but was cut short by Iron Man's solid tones of command.

"All right, you two, that's enough! We're a team, remember? And Captain America's life—as well as our own—may well depend on our performance as a team. So any chips on anyone's shoulders are hereby suspended until we all get back to our own time, and our own world. Is that clear?"

Quicksilver's words were as cold as his eyes were smoldering. "Yes. Quite clear."

"Of course, Iron Man," Wanda added. "I'm sorry."

"All right, then. The Vision will catch up to us when he's ready." Iron Man began walking up the street in the direction in which Mauler had pointed. "Let's go."

The five-block journey down the main promenade was an education in itself. Nowhere was there any sign of the oppressive dictatorship or social disorder that had been prophesied in so many doomsday novels of the twentieth century. Indeed, instead of harsh government edicts, it seemed that this future Earth was ruled more by the direct demands of commerce and leisure.

The Avengers walked slowly, fascinated by the bizarre variety of goods and services available to their cultural descendants. To one side was a large window through which

could be seen a number of sleeping people reposing in individual, multicolored booths, plastic-coated wires running from their heads to individual controls at a master console. The lettering on the window proclaimed it to be “Fred & Ethel’s Doze-An’-Shows Dream Shoppe. New Cassettes Delivered Weekly.”

Nearby was an eatery called the Bagel Yum, which was fronted by a huge, holographic bagel sporting a smiling face. The menu in the window boasted that the Bagel Yum offered only the finest of soy bagels, along with a wide variety of toppings that included cream cheese and penguin, imported Martian lichen (red or white), and a somewhat questionable delicacy called Puberty Surprise (“Chef Raoul’s specialty”).

Thus, the Avengers were less surprised than might have been expected when they turned a corner from the main avenue onto a side path and passed by a tall building whose windows were plastic replicas of ecumenical stained glass. Those windows were currently being rattled by the thudding pressure of overly amplified music, and occasionally one could hear “evuhbody in thuh whole cell block, wuz a-dancin’ tuh thuh jailhouse rock-rock-rock-rock-rock-rock!” being screamed over the booming bass. A scroll-like sign hung beneath a revolving reflector globe above the door, and its gold lettering read, “Second Church of the Latter-Day Elvis, Reverend Wolfman Sid, Presiding. Sermon Concerts Friday and Saturday Nights (5 Creds Donation). Guest Clones Will Perform.”

The side path was less wide than the main thoroughfare. And though it was paved with the same spotless pink plastic, it somehow seemed grittier, more worn, than its larger counterpart. The shops here were smaller, darker, and many advertised services that would make Larry Flynt blush.

The Beast had been bounding back and forth between his friends and the flanking buildings, peering into windows and snickering. (“Geez, Cap,” he’d say to the ice block he carried effortlessly on one shoulder, “42nd Street was *never* like this!”) Now, having walked with his comrades for a few yards, he turned again to leap away—only to find himself face to face with the haunt-eyed Vision.

“Holy Jiminy Christmas!” exclaimed the startled Beast, almost dropping Captain America. “Why don’t you wear a friggin’ bell around your neck!”

“I have never seen the need for unnecessary adornment,” the Vision answered, matter-of-factly.

“Never mind that,” said Iron Man as the other Avengers gathered around, the Scarlet Witch coming to stand beside her husband. “Did you find out anything?”

“Knowledge, I fear,” answered the synthezoid, “is a rare commodity in this world. There are no libraries, and there appears to be little desire for any. I was, however, able to discover a small collector’s shop that had amongst its inventory a dusty history tape. The proprietor, when he regained his composure, allowed me to scan portions of it.”

“That’s great, Vision,” said Iron Man. “We picked up a lead on Kang while you were gone, so why don’t you fill us in on what you learned while we check it out.”

“Very well, Iron Man. I think you should find it most interesting.”

Once again, the six time-traveling heroes began to walk down the plastic pathway. The Scarlet Witch took her husband’s arm, walking beside him. Quicksilver walked a short distance behind, glowering.

“This Earth,” began the Vision, “is the end result of a total socioeconomic collapse that occurred in the last decade of the twentieth century. Afterward, as humans began to rebuild their society, they had an uncharacteristically logical

burst of insight. They realized that if they rebuilt the *same* society, they were doomed to repeat their previous tragedies. Thus they determined, with the aid of several thousand years of bloody hindsight, to work together to save their race from an endless cycle of growth followed by destruction.

“The root cause of all their recent problems, the new World Government decided, was overpopulation: too many people clamoring for too few resources. And though riots, mob violence, and famine had reduced the Earth’s population dramatically, a mass effort was made to see that such a dangerous overcrowding would never occur again. A unified league of scientists pressed all of their efforts toward restoring the technology of space travel, and then to advancing that science to the point where colonization of the other planets in the solar system was feasible. In a matter of several decades, they were successful.”

The other Avengers listened intently as they walked. Even Thor, who as a god knew the future better than any of them, was fascinated by the Vision’s tale.

The synthezoid continued. “The majority of the Earth’s people were then piloted to her sister planets, the largest numbers going to Jupiter and Saturn as the result of a revived cult movement called ‘Tolkienism.’ It had something to do with the rings, I believe—the tape wasn’t terribly clear on that.

“For quite a few generations, the colonies got along very well, practicing a planned laissez-faire philosophy that had been designed by the World Government—now the Colonial Government—to create the least possible friction between and within the colonies. Population was no longer a threat and people found, much to their own surprise, that they could actually get along with one another.

“The Earth, unfortunately, was another matter entirely. The planet was nearly forgotten by the departed colonists,

and fell into a period of war and brutality as successions of petty dictators and instant governments fought for rule of the world. The darkest hour came when control of most of the planet fell into the hands of an ultrazealous religious faction called the Purists. Their Conscience Police pursued such a reign of terror that word of it finally reached even the Colonial Government.

“At that point, the colonists rallied to rout the Purists and retake Earth. Their science was superior, and so the battle was a short one. But even though the hostilities had been limited, and the casualties few, the colonists had been very annoyed—laissez-faire had become a way of life, and they resented having to meddle in what they considered to be other people’s problems. So, in order to prevent the recurrence of such conditions in the future, they relocated most of Earth’s remaining populace and redeveloped the planet into . . . well . . .”

“Yes, Vision?” Iron Man prodded. “Go on.”

“Into an amusement area for tourists.”

“What?!” The Beast’s mouth dropped open. “You mean they’ve turned this entire world into some sort of cosmic Disneyland? Of all the nerve!”

“Yes,” the Vision answered, “it is rather humiliating. But the colonists reasoned that such a move would eliminate the last possibility for conflict in their near-perfect system. In fact, in the centuries since, their science has been focused almost entirely toward the creation and utilization of leisure time, making the Earth the most valued planet in the solar system.”

Inside his metal mask, Tony Stark wiggled his nose, then cybernetically ordered a thin vinyl rod to extend from the top of his helmet to scratch it.

“Looks like things have come full circle, population-wise,” he said. “At least that explains why there aren’t very many

people walking the streets."

"Yeah," added the Beast. "It also accounts for why the folks who are here show about as much concern as a bunch of well-fed Guernseys. It almost makes me appreciate the friendly snarls and one-finger salutes of a Manhattan rush hour. And that's scary!"

The Avengers had come to the end of the seven blocks that Mauler had indicated and had stopped, the Beast lowering Captain America's ice block to the plastic walkway beside him.

"Maybe so, Beast," the Scarlet Witch said in a puzzled tone, "but I still don't understand what all this has to do with Kang. The only suggestion of battle or attempted conquest occurred centuries ago, according to that history tape. So what's Kang doing in this time?"

"Methinks thy question can best be answered, Wanda," Thor spoke calmly, "in the manner previously prescribed by our leader. That being to ask Kang himself—if, indeed, said base villain can be found."

"Uh, I got a feeling, Blondie," the Beast said, his head turned to look down a side path to his left, "that that isn't going to be a terribly difficult problem."

One by one, the other Avengers moved to where they could look down the walkway; and one by one, they saw what the Beast had seen. Several blocks away, rising from the center of a large courtyard, was a glittering obelisk. Thirty feet wide and three times as tall, the structure's four sides were decorated with a solid, sparkling mass that could have been made of shards of broken glass—or of an oil sheik's ransom in precious gems. On the side facing them was what appeared to be a solid gray doorway, without handle or window. But the building's most distinctive feature by far was perched, as if impossibly balanced, atop the point of the spire's pyramid-shaped peak. It was a blinking neon sign that sported blazing red letters ten feet high.

And those letters flashed the name “KANG,” on and off . . . on and off . . . on and off . . .

Eleven

“Modest, ain’t he?”

The Beast had reshouldered the ice block and now stood bathed in the light of the neon sign along with four of his fellow Avengers, some twenty-five feet from the obelisk. The remaining Avenger, the Vision, hovered in the air over the towering spire. The courtyard itself was deserted, the surrounding buildings closed, empty, and eerily silent.

“He does seem conspicuously unconcerned about keeping his presence a secret,” Iron Man admitted. “He’s got to know by now that his plot against us in the past failed. So he’s either incredibly confident, or this is one hell of a trap.” He tilted his head back slightly and increased his vocal amplification “See anything, Vision?”

The hovering synthazoid, desolidifying to the point where he could float on prevailing air currents, answered in equally electronic tones. “Nothing, Iron Man. There are no openings in the peak. It would appear that the sole point of egress is through the front door.”

“Damn,” Iron Man said to himself. As Tony Stark, he had designed security systems for some of the twentieth century’s most important corporations. But what he faced now beat them all. For as he and his fellow warriors had approached the obelisk, they had discovered that the surrounding courtyard was not covered entirely by the now familiar pink plastic. Instead, radiating from the tower and encircling it to a distance of approximately twenty-five feet, was what looked to be a moat. But when they reached that trench, they found it to be something more than an everyday, run-of-the-mill castle creek. They approached the moat cautiously, in ones and twos, but when they peered down over the fosse’s rim they gasped as a single entity; in lieu of the expected deep water or hungry alligator, they could see what could most accurately be described as a back corner of infinity. It was deep space; dark, star-spattered, and as cold and still as a dead man’s breath. Kang was a master of space as well as time, and he had surrounded his command center with a space warp as endless as his maniacal imagination. Oddly enough, he had also supplied a bridge, the color and clarity of thin lemonade, that linked the plastic courtyard to the obelisk’s door.

“Well, Shellhead,” the Beast said as he shifted the ice block to a more comfortable position, “it looks like you’d better appoint someone to play Avon lady.”

Quicksilver stood next to Iron Man. “There’s no need for selection, Beast. I’m obviously the one to try Kang’s defenses. As the fastest among us, I can be past any traps —”

Quicksilver stood next to the obelisk across the bridge. “— before they can activate.”

“Maybe so, Pietro,” Iron Man’s tone was not appreciative, “but I think a little more preplanning would have been to our advantage.”

Iron Man's meaning was made graphically clear as the shining yellow bridge split evenly across the middle and began to slowly retract into the banks of the moat. Quicksilver had indeed been successful in avoiding the trap, but not in keeping that trap from being sprung.

Iron Man barked orders in a voice comfortable with command. "Wanda, Beast, jump across to the other side of the bridge before the gap gets too wide! Vision, try to penetrate the door and see if there are any controls to open it on the other side! Thor, take to the air! You and I will watch the flanks for attack!"

Without a second thought, all of the Avengers followed their orders. The Beast leaped the five-foot gap easily, even carrying his frozen burden. Wanda followed as the gap widened to six feet, and stood with her brother and the Beast next to the obelisk's featureless gray door. They were joined in seconds by the Vision, who immediately desolidified into a state as transparent as tissue and pushed forward in an effort to pass through the door—only to stop, his head canted slightly, with his fingers and part of his palms immersed in the shimmering gray slab.

"This . . . is very odd," he said evenly, pulling at his hands. "Kang's advanced science must have created this obelisk. Its substance is so dense that even I cannot pass through. Likewise, I can't seem to withdraw!"

Quicksilver smirked as he pressed his back against the door. "So, android, you've finally found a peril that your clattering circuits can't solve, eh?"

"Need I remind you, Speedster," the Vision stood motionless, his shadowed eyes angled toward Quicksilver, "that it is a peril of *your* causing?"

The Beast placed the ice block on his head and balanced it there as he squeezed back against the door. The bridge had retracted to a point where it extended from the bank a mere five feet.

“Look, guys, you can settle your little tiffs some other time, okay? Right now, someone had better come up with a real swift alternative or we’re all gonna be space kites!”

But in the air above, an alternative had already been decided upon.

“Thor!” Iron Man cried. “Hit the door from the left! I’ll hit it from the right!” The battle plan was simple; there was no time for the elaborate. The yellow bridge had shrunk to no more than three feet in length, and the cosmic moat yawned awesomely.

Trying not to think of what would happen if they failed, Iron Man brought both fists out before him and kicked in the boosters on his boot jets, speeding at a downward angle directly toward the obelisk door. To his left, Thor swung mighty Mjolnir once around his head and then flung it earthward, holding the mallet by its handle so that it carried him in its wake toward the glittering spire.

Armored Avenger and enchanted hammer struck the grim gray door in unison at a point several feet above the immobilized Vision’s head, and the very heavens trembled. The door shattered, cracking into fist-sized pieces and exploding inward as Iron Man and Thor crashed through. Pressing against the door, Quicksilver, the Vision, and the Scarlet Witch also tumbled inside in a rain of gray dust and skittering rubble.

The Beast, however, was not so fortunate. He had also been leaning against the door, but when the resistance had ceased and he had begun to fall backward, the ice block on his head—the ice block that contained a helpless friend and colleague—had tilted forward. Almost as much from instinct as thought, the Beast reached out as he fell, grabbing hold of the block and twisting, hurling the massive weight back into the obelisk. It was only then that he realized that he had pushed himself *out* of that structure, and that the lemon colored bridge had completely retracted.

With a strained grimace and an unconsciously whispered “Aw, nuts,” Hank McCoy dropped into the void.

Twelve

Thor was the only one who actually saw the Beast fall. “ ’Od’s blood!” he cried, instantly bringing Mjolnir around to carry him forward, sweeping past the still-sprawling Avengers like a blond missile. As he shot through the shattered doorway, he pointed Mjolnir straight down, streaking into the cosmic moat without a pause.

“Good lord,” mused Quicksilver, slapping dust from his uniform as he rose to his feet. “Now why do you suppose the Thunder God did that?”

“I don’t . . .” the Scarlet Witch began, but stopped as she saw the filmy ice block settling in the rubble. Desperately, she looked around, and then her large brown eyes grew even larger with realization. “Oh, my God! The Beast! Hank didn’t make it!”

“Thor must have gone after him,” the Vision said, rising and wafting toward the door. “He may need help.”

Iron Man scrambled through the debris, reaching the doorway just ahead of the synthezoid. “No, Vision! We have

to wait here. You or I might be able to survive deep space for a while, but if we got lost, there's a good chance that at least one of us wouldn't get back! And our forces have been cut down enough already. Thor's a god; if anyone can bring the Beast back, he can!"

Another hero might have ignored Iron Man's orders, determined to sacrifice his own life for that of a friend, but the Vision was a creature of logic. He saw the reason in his leader's argument, and so resolidified and floated back down to the floor. And if you had asked him about the grumbling sound he made, he would have insisted calmly that it was merely his stabilizers shifting.

The four Avengers gathered at the jagged opening that had been the obelisk's door, moving like mourners at a wake. They would grieve at the loss of any of their members, but the Beast—like some endearing, oversized teddy bear—had earned a special place in their hearts. Even Quicksilver, gruff and hot tempered, held a well-hidden affection for him.

And so they waited, watching the void in a silence broken only by tense breathing and the whispered sigh of settling dust. They waited for what seemed like minutes, hours, eons, but in reality it was only seconds later that Iron Man stabbed a gauntleted finger toward the star-sparkled moat, calling out, "There! My long-range sensors have picked up something moving this way, fast!"

So fast that an instant later they all saw the rapidly approaching speck, and only seconds after that Thor hurtled through the doorway into the obelisk, a shuddering blue burden slung over one shoulder.

"Thank God! He's alive!" Wanda said joyously as Thor carefully set the Beast down near the door.

The Beast was indeed alive, but just barely. He lay huddled in a fetal position on the floor, eyes closed,

trembling uncontrollably. His long fur was matted with tiny icicles that clinked together dully as he shook.

“Our comrade’s foresight in holding his breath hath stayed asphyxia,” Thor said darkly. “But I know not if my rescue wert timely enow to forestall a more lingering death from the chill of space.”

“Just leave that to me, buddy,” Iron Man said, moving forward to kneel down beside the Beast. He then reached to his waist, giving the discus-shaped power-storage pods at each side a quarter turn, clockwise, to remove them from their holding connectors. The pods were designed to store solar energy gathered by the refractory surface of Iron Man’s armor, and were utilized to power that armor when direct sunlight wasn’t available, or when extra boosts of strength were required. Now, as Iron Man fitted the pods to the receptacles in the palms of his gauntlets—the same receptacles from which his repulsor rays were emitted—and secured them with a counterclockwise quarter turn, they were about to serve another purpose.

Reaching out to hold the power pods a foot or so from the Beast’s quivering form, Iron Man began to release some of the stored energy slowly, in the form of electric heat. As the warmth radiated with a low hum, the Armored Avenger moved the pods gradually over the Beast’s body until the icicles began to melt, and the tremors lessened. In little more than a minute, the trembling had almost completely ceased, and the Beast’s eyelids rose heavily, his mouth pulling into a weak, though sincere, smile.

“A-Anyb-body f-for a t-trip to B-Bermuda? M-M-My t-treat?”

“Welcome back, Beast,” the Scarlet Witch said softly.

Thor and Quicksilver helped the Beast to his feet, where he stood rubbing the residual chill from his biceps as Iron Man replaced the storage pods at his waist. From the moment that the lemonade bridge had split apart, they had had little time for anything but the incidentals of survival.

Now, with the abatement of tension and immediate danger, they looked about at their surroundings for the first time—and were astounded.

On the outside, Kang's obelisk was no more than thirty feet square. Its interior, however, was impossibly rectangular, a good three *hundred* feet long, with a width half its length and a height, at least in this particular chamber, that was half its width. Kang was, indeed, a master of space.

But even more bizarre than the huge hall's dimensions was its decor. Lining every tapestried wall were clocks, watches, timepieces of every size, age, and description—hundreds of them, thousands of them, from hourglasses and sundials to digital-readout LEDs and numerals that seemed to float in the air. More such devices hung from the ceiling, and more rested in glass display cases on the carpeted floor. And every one of them had stopped, silent.

The Beast let out a low whistle. "Whew! Talk about *kitsch!* How many of those freaky tick-tocks do you think there are?"

"My scanners indicate that there are precisely 86,400 chronometers in evidence," the Vision answered, obligingly.

"It figures," Iron Man said. "There are 86,400 seconds in a day, and Kang is just mad enough to have constructed this room to symbolize his belief that he controls them all. And I'll bet that if you checked each of those clocks, you'd find that every one was stopped at a different second."

Quicksilver fidgeted. "Granted that our quarry is a lunatic, Iron Man, how do we find him?"

Iron Man pointed to either side of the long hallway. "I don't think we've got much choice."

Halfway down the length of the room, set into the walls on each side, were two doors with crossbar opening rods, looking very much like theater exit doors painted gold.

Above the door to the left was an illuminated sign that read, “up.” Above the door to the right was an illuminated sign that read . . . “up.”

“Well, guys, I guess we’ve reached the pits,” offered the Beast. “Looks like there’s nowhere to go from here but up!”

The Scarlet Witch groaned. “Next time, Thor, don’t look so hard, okay?”

“Aw, shucks,” the Beast said, bowing his head in mock chagrin.

Iron Man ignored the banter. “We don’t know if either of those doors leads anywhere, but since the Vision can’t walk through these particular walls, we’ll have to try them both. Thor, Vision, Beast—you take the left. Wanda, Pietro, and I’ll go up through the right. And be careful. I doubt that that roll-away bridge was the only trick up Kang’s sleeve.”

The six heroes split up, three moving to either side. The Beast now carried the cumbersome ice block under one arm as he loped along, whistling “Hi-ho, hi-ho, it’s off to work we go . . .” to himself. When he, the Vision, and Thor reached the left door, the Norse god of thunder put his left hand cautiously on the crossbar, gripping Mjolnir solidly in his right, ready for any assault that might await them beyond. Then, raising his mighty mallet high over his head, he pushed down on the bar and shoved the door wide to face the unknown. In this instance, the unknown was a softly lit corridor the same muted green color as many twentieth century hospitals. Its floor was covered in tiles of a darker green, and sloped upward in a gradually ascending, curving ramp.

Thor glanced back across the ground-floor hall and saw that Iron Man had opened the opposite door to an identical corridor. He raised a hand in salute—Iron Man responded with a “thumbs’ up” gesture—and then stepped into the green passageway, followed by his two comrades.

The corridor wasn’t very large, perhaps six feet wide at the most, and curved to the right at a steady angle as it rose. The walls were featureless, unbroken, and were lit from some unseen source, making the upward journey doubly tedious: the first onus being the constant wariness of possible danger, the second the sheer sameness of the surroundings. Ironically, considering the situation, none of the three heroes wore watches, and so each monotonous minute seemed like ten to them.

The Beast grew bored quickly, and began practicing his mail-order ventriloquism on the ice block, having the frozen Captain America return (badly) some of Charlie McCarthy’s classic punch lines. Even Thor grew lax, his senses dulled by the sameness of the climb.

Thus it was that the Vision’s untiring scanners first perceived the throaty whisper of rapidly approaching death.

“Attend! Something approaches!” The Vision stopped, pointing to the passageway ahead. The others stopped as well, staring in the direction of that stabbing finger. At first, they saw nothing; then death rumbled into view, a swirling black cloud filled with glittering, guttering sparks, like thousands of miniature, dancing stars. The cloud swooped down the corridor toward the startled Avengers, roaring and roiling and ripping up tiles.

And then it was on them, buffeting and battering like a wind out of hell. Thor was forced backward a step, instinctively raising an arm to protect his eyes from the burning particles that tore at his clothing and skin. Having traveled the spaceways countless times during his immortal life, the Asgardian immediately recognized the deadly, whirling mass for what it was.

“ ’Tis a cosmic storm!” he cried, trying to be heard above the din of chaos. “Kang hath plucked solar wind and caustic rain from the very heavens to protect his citadel!”

The Vision had already analyzed the nature of the contained tempest, and so had desolidified a fractioned instant before it struck, allowing both cosmic particles and raking wind to pass harmlessly through him.

The Beast, on the other hand, was neither as swift nor as fortunate. The first gust of solar wind had knocked him off his feet, flat onto his furry backside where, eyes closed to the swirling onslaught, he had held fast to his ice-encrusted charge as the unnatural gale had carried them both back down the corridor, sliding and banging off walls like a bumper car in a sadist's carnival.

Ahead, neither of his companions had noted the Beast's unwilling departure, being engaged as they were in the more immediate aspects of saving their own lives.

Acknowledging Thor's unquestioned position as temporary leader, the Vision proposed, "This whirlwind has little effect on me in my present state, Thor. It might be prudent for me to move through to its point of origin. Perhaps I can locate Kang and force him to cease this meteorological assault."

"Thy courageous offer is appreciated, my friend," Thor called through the howling tempest, "but 'twill not be necessary. For no storm, natural or man forged, canst hold long before the god of thunder, before the mighty son of Odin!"

Still holding one arm before his face, Thor began swinging Mjolnir in a circle before him with his other hand. Faster. So fast that it soon acted as a solid mass, deflecting both hurricane gusts and the searing particles they carried. Thor lowered the arm from his face, his blond hair no longer blown by the torrent that raged about him, and he smiled. Then, in a single motion, he raised Mjolnir high, stopped the hammer in midswing and dropped swiftly to one knee, bringing the butt of the mystic mallet down with smashing force against the green-tiled floor.

The corridor rocked with the booming of god-brought thunder, and the air was filled with forked fingers of magical lightning. For an instant, there was a sensation of conflict, as if two incredibly powerful armies clashed in an unseen war. And then, as quickly as it had come, the lightning faded; while in its wake, the black mass and sparkling particles of the cosmic storm began to dissipate, thinning and scattering until there was nothing left but a memory, and a dark, gritty residue on the floor and walls.

The Vision resolidified as Thor rose to his full height once more. “As thou canst see, friend Vision, Kang’s shower was but a minor inconvenience to a true master of all thunder and storm. But how fairest thou and—*the Beast!”*

Thor had turned to see, for the first time, that the corridor behind them was empty.

“Blast!” he swore. “To have snatched the noble Hank McCoy from the icy clutches of space only to lose him again, and this time with Captain America . . . it doth approach being more than e’en an immortal soul can stand!”

The Vision had put a hand on Thor’s broad shoulder. “I agree, Thor. It is a frustrating tragedy. But you do realize, of course, that it would be illogical to search for him now?”

“Aye. We’ve still an important task to perform, and the Beast be not without strengths of his own. We can but pray that he doth not encounter perils beyond their means. Come, let us proceed.”

Turning grimly and determinedly, Thor marched back up the sloping green corridor, followed by the silent Vision. As he walked, the Thunder God alternately tightened and loosened his grip on Mjolnir, hoping fervently that when they finally did confront Kang, the Master of Time would not be cooperative.

At the same moment that the Vision had first sensed the roiling storm cloud, Iron Man, Quicksilver, and the Scarlet Witch were approaching a doorway. They had been climbing the second green corridor, one that rose in a leftward curve, for about ten minutes, and Iron Man had spent most of that time denying Quicksilver's repeated requests to speed ahead and scout the terrain. The last time Pietro had rushed into something, Iron Man reasoned, he had almost gotten several of them killed.

All argument had ceased, however, when they rounded yet another portion of the curving passageway and came face-to-mask with an incongruous wooden door. The door was set in a solid-oak frame and looked as if it might have been patterned after the fashion of the mid-1800s. Ornate gilt lettering on a frosted glass panel set in the upper half of the door spelled out the word, "Kang." A paper sign hanging from the brass doorknob read, "The Conqueror Is In/Out," with the word "In" circled.

Now, as they stepped to stand in front of the door, Iron Man put a gauntleted hand to the back of his neck, wishing that he could rub his weary muscles through the metal. "So tell me," he said. "Why do I get this strange feeling that we're not dealing with a terribly rational human being?"

"Perhaps," answered the Scarlet Witch, matching her leader's ironic tone, "because we aren't."

"Good point. Shall we go in?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Pietro Frank said quickly. "What are we waiting for?"

Iron Man smiled wryly as he reached for the doorknob. Quicksilver was a good man, and a good teammate. But he had about as much patience as a Doberman in heat.

The knob turned silently, and the heavy door swung smoothly inward on shiny hinges. What the three heroes saw in the room beyond should have startled them; but

after all they had viewed and experienced in the last few (relative) hours, they could work up little more than mild interest, along with their usual, well-trained wariness.

Like the sloping corridors, the room was green—all green. It was obviously a music room, roughly the size of a small theater, and everything inside—walls, floor, and furnishings—ran the gamut from light mint to deep olive. There was a green grand piano with a green stool, a green chandelier hanging from a green ceiling, and green violins and cellos stacked in a green corner. Along the walls, green picture frames held pages of sheet music printed on green paper—from songs such as “My Time Is Your Time,” “Time Won’t Let Me,” “Twilight Time,” et cetera.

“When this is all over, Iron Man,” the Scarlet Witch whispered, “remind me to be very ill.”

The only contrast to the verdant surroundings were two dozen silverish-metal globes that sat on green pedestals about six feet above the door. Iron Man decided that it was not purely coincidence that the pedestals flanked the direct path across the music room, between the door where they stood and an open doorway in the opposite wall, through which the rising corridor could be seen to continue.

“Quicksilver,” he said, “try to make your way around one side, behind those globes—and take it slowly! Wanda, you go around the other side. I’ll try going down the middle.”

Step by cautious step—a procedure that the Silver Speedster naturally found less than satisfactory—the three Avengers made their way across the room. They really didn’t expect to make the passage without incident, and they weren’t disappointed.

“You are not authorized to be in this sector! **bzzt-klik** ” The tinny voice apparently came from one of the globes. The Avengers were about halfway across the room. “You will proceed immediately to the string section to play

accompaniment or you will have your wrists severely slapped! **bzzt-klik** Or possibly removed!”

The Avengers stopped dead in their tracks—*now* they were startled! As the trio of time travelers watched, fist-sized holes irised open in the sides of the shiny globes and thick metal arms telescoped out. At a distance of about a yard, the arms sprouted fingers at their tips, and then bent back on integral elbows, grasped the sides of the pedestals and lifted the globes free. As the arms held the spheres beyond the green columns, larger holes opened in each orb’s top and bottom surface, letting a smooth trunk extend in both directions. Like clockwork, the top of each trunk grew what was ostensibly a metal head, complete with multifaceted sensor eyes and a speaker-grid mouth; the bottom of each trunk was capped off with wheels, sets of treads, or casters.

The robots looked silly as hell.

“They do not move,” a second tinny voice spoke up. “Perhaps they would prefer to play brass. **klik-bzzt**”

“Wanda! Pietro!” Iron Man cried out. “Get to the other door! Fast!”

Of course, Iron Man’s last word was superfluous in regards to Quicksilver, who had already reached the opposite wall even before it had been spoken. But the Golden Avenger didn’t notice—he was too preoccupied in trying to take his own advice. Realizing that full jet power would be awkward in the enclosed area of the music room, he activated his alternate mobility system, releasing a small, wide wheel from the thick sole of each of his boots. Then, balancing on those wheels, he triggered tiny jet nozzles in the heels of his boots and went skimming across the floor, swerving around both robots and pedestals with a dexterity that would have made even the hardest roller-derby queen steam with envy. The boot skates were designed only as a backup, to provide

minimum necessary mobility, but they still took Iron Man to the opposite doorway only seconds after Quicksilver.

Unfortunately, the Scarlet Witch had neither her brother's speed nor her leader's gadgetry. She had only her own two feet, and she had moved them but a few fleet steps when the metal mechanoids trundled between her and her swifter comrades. The fingers on the ends of the constructs' jointed arms had retracted, and had been replaced by a variety of miniature chain saws, laser drills, razor-sharp blades, and other devices whose purposes could only be guessed in nightmares.

The robots no longer looked silly.

"They refuse to play. They have no artistic sensibilities! **bzzt-klik** They must be sent to bed without their supper! **frrt-pzzz** Or their limbs! **klik**"

The mechanical musicians attacked, and without the formality of a spoken order, the Avengers attacked back. Bracing her feet, the Scarlet Witch cast hex bolts in a half dozen directions around her, catching the six nearest advancing robots square in the solenoids. The struck automatons stopped instantly, their internal gear mechanisms fused into solid lumps, and then toppled forward, hitting the floor like discarded scrap.

To one side, apparently fed-up with the delay, the green piano began playing a boogie version of "In the Good Old Summertime" on its own.

Iron Man jetted into the fray, crouching low as he skated in and out around the robots, blasting them left and right with his repulsors. A laser bolt shot past his head, and he ducked away instinctively, only to find that he had feinted directly into the path of a whirring, diamond-bladed chain saw. The saw scraped across his helmet, leaving a barely perceptible scratch, and Iron Man jerked a hand up to grab the attacking robot's arm before it had been pulled out of reach. Then, curving around with the off-balance mechanical

man in tow, he whipped his arm forward, slamming the chain saw robot into the one that had shot the laser bolt, sending a rain of gears, screws, wires and shrapnel skittering across the music-room floor.

Quicksilver who had been circling the outer perimeter of the room looking for an opening, now darted inward, swooping directly past each of the ten or so remaining robots. Caught in the vacuum of the speedster's slipstream, the mechanoids were lifted from the floor and drawn behind him. When he had gathered every still-functioning robot, Quicksilver increased his speed to maximum, headed directly for a far wall, and only inches from that wall, made an instant ninety-degree turn. The robots, having very little say in the matter, continued forward, smashing one by one into the wall until the mound of bent and twisted metal on the floor resembled the aftermath of an Indy 500 pileup.

For a moment, the three Avengers stood staring at the mechanical carnage they had wrought. "What a shame," said Iron Man. "Mauler would probably pay a million creds for this mess." He then retracted his boot skates and, followed by his teammates, resumed his journey up the sloping corridor.

As they left, the green piano finished a final arpeggio, and waited for applause.

Some moments later, Thor and the Vision had apparently come to the end of their quest. The slope of their corridor had leveled off, and they now stood at the beginning of a long, straight hallway. At the other end of the hall was another gold-painted exit door, similar to the ones at ground level, except that this one was labeled "Entrance."

The two heroes approached the door cautiously, the Vision reducing his mass so that he might prove less vulnerable to anything that might come screaming, shooting, or slicing from the other side. Holding Mjolnir at the ready, Thor

reached down to the golden crossbar and pushed. The door moved forward slightly, then met resistance. Releasing his hold on the bar, Thor raised his mystic hammer in both hands, ready to bring it down against the door in a smashing blow.

It was then that the door pushed inward and Iron Man stepped through.

The Avengers' leader was as unsettled as Thor at what he saw, though for somewhat different reasons. "Uh, you want to put that ball-peen battering ram down real slow, big guy? Please?"

Thor lowered his hammer, still staring incredulously. "But what . . . how . . . ?" He looked beyond Iron Man, and saw Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch standing, equally surprised, in another green corridor identical to the one in which he was standing.

"These infernal passageways!" he exclaimed. "They go nowhere!"

Iron Man leaned back against a wall, crossing his arms, disgusted. "So it seems. We keep forgetting what a twisted mind Kang has. A normal megalomaniac would build his headquarters on the top floor of an ivory tower. Kang's probably got his command center in the basement—with an ivory tower built over it just for show!"

"By the damnation in Hela's eyes!" rumbled Thor. "I tire of being toyed with! Of having my friends and comrades smitten and wearied by the whims of a madman! If Kang doth indeed be in this house of lunacy, he shall answer to the power of Thor! And he shall answer *now!"*

So saying, the angered Thunder God swung Mjolnir up before him, letting it carry him up a short distance. Then he brought it back down again, head first, slamming it into the tiled floor and following it through the gaping hole that it made there. For some seconds afterward, the other

Avengers could hear the resounding *crash-crash-crash* as Thor battered his way down through the succeeding levels of the obelisk.

Then Iron Man stepped up to the hole in the floor and said, “Thor’s shown us the way, but he’s likely to need some help when he reaches the bottom. Vision, you take Wanda. Pietro, hop on my back. I don’t think we’d better wait for the elevator.”

Wordlessly, Quicksilver climbed onto Iron Man’s shoulders, piggyback style. He was almost as mortified by this mode of transport as he was by the way his sister smiled as the Vision wrapped a synthetic arm around her waist.

Then, Iron Man and the Vision stepped off into the hole in the floor, and with their clinging burdens began flying/floating down through the impossible obelisk.

Thor smashed his way through seven different levels, wondering as he did why he hadn’t passed through any of them on his way up, before he came to the clock-filled hall on the ground floor. Without pausing, he followed Mjolnir down through that last barrier, exploding at last in a shower of carpet threads and granite dust into a massive subchamber below.

The temperature of the subchamber was noticeably lower than that in the rest of the building, and the reasons for that coolness surrounded the Avengers. Lining every wall of the auditorium-sized room, from flagstone floor to high, flat ceiling, were banks and banks of gleaming, chattering, computerlike machines, machines that required very specific temperatures. In the center of the room was a curved, muitisectioned control console, and at that console sat a man, a large man, an awesome man—a madman.

Kang stared at Thor, and his blue-masked face betrayed no emotion. But the eyes behind that azure fabric were

wide, not with fear, nor with rage, but with the involuntary dilation of genuine surprise.

“And just what the bloody hell,” Kang spoke with great sincerity, “are *you* doing here?”

Thirteen

“Foul miscreant! Thy nefarious machinations hath caused pain and sorrow beyond measure, yet thou showest puzzlement at the arrival of retribution? Thy gall doth sicken me!”

Kang rose, his purple-and-green robes flowing, and touched a button on the miniature control board that took the place of a buckle on his wide belt. Instantly, a golden aura shimmered into being around him. Thor recognized that shimmering from his previous encounters with Kang: it was a personal force field. One that, like Aningan Kenojuak’s protective glow, could withstand attack from even Thor’s mighty Uru hammer.

“You don’t belong here!” Kang shouted. “I didn’t invite you here! This is my palace! Mine! Now go away”

Kang started forward, but stopped as Iron Man and the rest of the Avengers wafted down from the hole in the ceiling and settled on the floor.

“What? More of you?” Kang kept a wary hand on the control board at his waist. “Damn, blast and ballulation! Must you *always* meddle in my affairs! Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“Leave *you* alone?!” Iron Man said, stepping forward. “Look, Kang, you’re the one who sicced that Eskimo medicine man on us, who almost had us killed! If it wasn’t for Captain America’s still being trapped inside that ice block, we never would have even—”

“Wait!” Kang held up a hand to interrupt, cocking his head to one side as if thinking. “Did you say ‘Eskimo’? And ‘Captain—’ . . . oh, no. It couldn’t be that. It couldn’t have . . .” Kang laughed, a short, sharp, sinus-rooted bark. He looked over at the Avengers, a devilish twinkle in his eyes, and then threw his head back, laughing uproariously. The puzzled and increasingly irritated heroes started forward and Kang’s laughter stopped immediately, his head snapping back down to face them.

“It was a joke,” he said soberly. The Avengers stopped. “I was passing through your era on a casual jaunt when I overheard some used-up old spook-monger mumbling something about a red-white-and-blue god. Because of my frequent, and regrettable, encounters with you glorified do-gooders, I naturally was reminded of Captain America. And when I stopped and listened to the old potion-pusher’s tale, I knew I was right, having personally witnessed the good Captain’s Arctic voyage with some amusement on a previous time skip.

“That Sub-Mariner, by the way, has such a delightful temper. Perhaps someday I’ll kill him.”

Kang paused for a moment to idly scratch his face through the skintight blue mask, examining his finger afterward as if searching for the remains of something delectable, and then resumed.

“Then I thought to myself, ‘My, my, what a marvelously annoying thing it would be if this old witch-chaser had the power to pursue his preposterous vendetta.’ And so I gave him that power.” Kang snickered. “I had no idea he would succeed.” He snickered again.

“Why, you . . . you self-serving madman!” Quicksilver was at Kang’s throat before anyone could think to hold him back, trying to strangle the time master through the unyielding force aura. “Do you mean that this entire episode, all the hurt and humiliation, was the result of some capricious *jest?* You sadistic maniac! I’ll rip the very life from you! I’ll—”

Kang frowned. “You’ll do nothing, you babbling bore, but die, unless you release your hold before I count to three, onetwothree!”

The force field crackled, reversing polarity for an instant as Kang touched a button at his belt buckle, and Quicksilver shot backward as if struck. The Silver Speedster skidded for ten feet as his sister ran after him, and Iron Man held out his arms to stay Thor and the Vision from pursuing the attack.

“Wanda,” Iron Man called, never taking his eyes from Kang. “How is he?”

The Scarlet Witch was kneeling beside Quicksilver, helping to raise him to his elbows. “He’s stunned, Iron Man,” she said. “But I don’t think there’s any real damage.”

“All right, then,” Iron Man said evenly. “There’s no need for anyone else to get hurt. Kang, if all this was a whim, as you say, then you should have no objection to removing the ice block your devices constructed around Captain America.”

“Why, no.” Kang was all smiles and cooperation, like a friendly cyanide salesman. “I’d be happy to. Where is the grand old flag-flapper, anyway?”

“He’s with . . .” Iron Man turned around, angry at himself for not having noticed the Beast’s absence. “Thor! Where’s the Beast?”

But before the blond god could answer, a voice drew all attention to a far corner of the room, where the smiling Beast could be seen loping out of a plain, inconspicuous doorway marked “Service Entrance,” the ever-present ice block over one shoulder. “One genuine, fur-upholstered Avenger, present and accounted for, sir,” he called.

“But how . . . what . . . where . . . ?” the other Avengers all asked at once, so that the Beast had to wave them quiet as he joined them. He gave Kang a cautious, sideways glance and then explained.

“Hey, everybody, just calm down. It’s no big deal. I just got caught in a big wind that blew me all the way back to the hall where we came in. When I got there, there was this old dude in coveralls with a toolbox shuffling around. He said he was the head of Kang’s maintenance lackeys and started grumbling about repairing the door we busted in. I sorta mentioned that I was looking for work and asked how to find the boss. I guess he could really use a helper ’cause he didn’t waste any time showing me the service entrance behind one of the grandfather clocks and voilà! Here I am.

“Y’know, Kang, this is one crazy condo you run here.”

Quickly, Iron Man outlined the situation for the Beast. And then together they placed the ice block in front of a grid-faced computer bank as directed by Kang. Hank McCoy watched with great interest—the scientist that he had once been still lurked behind his bestial exterior—as Kang adjusted dials and switches on the machine. Then, Kang touched a purple-gloved finger to one of the buttons at his waist, and Captain America joined the party.

The ice block shimmered, winked, and was gone, leaving a red-white-and-blue Avenger to open bleary eyes and say “Wha . . . ?” before collapsing to his knees. Quicksilver rushed in to support Cap, and all were relieved when the Vision announced, “My scanners indicate that his circulation

is a bit weak, but otherwise Captain America is as healthy and sound as ever."

"There," Kang snorted. "You have what you came for. Now leave. You're wasting my—" a smile flickered across his face; he giggled, "—time." The frown returned.

The Avengers were only too happy to comply. With Captain America supported between Iron Man and Thor, they followed the Beast to the door in the corner, then up an unadorned set of stairs.

When they were gone, Kang returned to his control console, flipping a switch that activated a dozen televisionlike monitor screens. As he watched the Avengers leaving his obelisk on one of the screens, he scowled.

"Damn their pure-heart eyes," he said to himself. "If they don't know now, they will soon. And they'll be back. They'll spoil my triumph like they always do. That is, unless . . ." A slow smile grew back on Kang's face. ". . . unless *I* spoil *them* first!"

They had been resting on the 40th-Century main street for several minutes now, perched on white-plastic benches around a pink-plastic fountain. Captain America was still a little groggy, but had taken the explanations that the other Avengers had offered rather well, considering.

"It's not all that difficult to readjust," Cap said, stretching, "the second time around. And remember, I was 'frozen' for a lot shorter period this time. All I need is a little exercise."

"Don't worry, Cap," the Beast said, sitting on the edge of the fountain with his back to the others, dangling his toes in the water. "Once Thor whips us back to our own century, I'll give you a good workout in the gym myself."

"I'm not sure that we'll be going back just yet, Beast," Iron Man said. "I know it sounds ludicrous, but there was something wrong with that whole scene at Kang's citadel.

He was just too cooperative, too willing to give us what we wanted. Kang's never missed a chance to try and waste us before, so why does he seem so eager to get rid of us now?"

"I agree, Iron Man," the Scarlet Witch added. "The idea of Kang living in the open, apparently benign, just doesn't wash with all the experience we've had with him in the past. I think we should go back and find out what really is going on."

Facing away from his friends, the Beast had stopped wiggling his toes in the fountain and was looking up with a worried expression. "Uh, I think I've found a hint, gang."

"What is it, Beast?" Wanda asked.

The Beast was looking higher now as a shadow fell across the fountain. "Ah, I'm not entirely sure, but I think the herpetology profs call it . . . Tyrannosaurus rex!"

Fourteen

The Beast's identification had been correct, much to the terror of the few tourists and pleasure-seekers who now ran screaming from the towering Thunder Lizard. The Avengers, directly in the lumbering monster's path, weren't too happy, either.

"Where the blazes did that creature come from?" cried Quicksilver.

"I don't know, Quicksy," answered the Beast as he scrambled out of the fountain. "The air started to go fuzzy about a yard above the street, and then that Godzilla stand-in just popped out of nowhere!"

"It's Kang's doing," the Scarlet Witch said. "Who else would pull a living dinosaur out of history and plop it down on a fortieth-century sidewalk?"

"In that case, maybe I'd better take the point," Captain America called, fixing his flag-striped shield to his arm as he started to rise. "I've been out of this fight so far, and I owe Kang a little—*uhf!*"

Thor caught the falling hero before he hit the plastic pavement. Cap smiled, a little embarrassed. “I, er, guess I haven’t quite got my land legs back yet. Sorry.”

“No problem, Cap,” Iron Man said. “You’ll blitz ’em next time. Thor, Beast, get Cap out of danger. The rest of us should be able to handle this overgrown chameleon before it does too much damage.”

The operative words of that statement proved to be “too much.” For even as the four remaining Avengers fanned out, the hulking dinosaur had already stepped on a floating fast-food cart that offered fourteen different varieties of Slo-Burgers. It was currently using its massive tail to obliterate the gilded façade of the “Richard M. Nixon Memorial Massage Parlor.”

On orders from Iron Man, Quicksilver sprinted in a circle about the saurian’s feet. The results were that the tyrannosaur, not being one of the brightest creatures ever to walk the Earth, started watching the speeding mutant rather than where it was walking—it never occurred to the lumbering reptile to actually stop its forward gait. Thus, when the Vision rose up from the plastic walk, it was unaware where it was about to place one of its scaly feet. It didn’t even notice when it stepped on the Vision, who had instantly solidified to a rock-hard mass, and its foot remained a good six feet above the pavement, sending its body tilting off balance as it pushed down on the obstructed foot.

But Iron Man noticed. Having taken to the air at the beginning of the maneuver, he now swooped down to slam into the Thunder Lizard’s side, knocking the beast even farther off balance. For a moment, the gargantuan reptile teetered on one leg, having yet to realize that it was no longer upright, then toppled over onto its side with a resounding *THABOOM.*

“All right, Wanda,” Iron Man called out from where he hovered, his boot jets on minimum thrust. “I think you can wrap it up now.”

The Scarlet Witch rose from where she had been crouching behind the fountain. Then, taking a firm stance, she brought her middle fingers down to touch her palms, raising her hands in hex signs so that one pointed at the water in the fountain and the other pointed at the downed but struggling Thunder Lizard. Drawing on her mutant ability to alter probabilities, she exerted a vacuumlike force on the fountain, pulling its water up in a funnel and directing that liquid to flow through the air until it splashed down on the quivering dinosaur nearby. She didn’t want to hurt the tyrannosaur; it was only an unknowing victim in a war it could never comprehend. And so she angled her hex signs inward until they crossed and then altered the flow of mutant energy.

Gradually, the dinosaur stopped moving, as the water that covered it froze solid, trapping it in a hypothermal prison that would leave the creature unharmed when it melted. *If it’s good enough for Cap,* Wanda reasoned, *it’s good enough for Rex.*

Iron Man landed near the fountain, joining the Vision and the Frank siblings. “Well,” he said, “I guess that settles any questions about Kang being on the up-and-up. Now all we have to do is find out what’s behind all th—”

“Hey!” The disgruntled cry came from the rubbled front of the Richard M. Nixon Memorial Massage Parlor. More specifically, it came from the disheveled woman who was clambering over the debris, making a last short jump to land square-footed on the street beyond. The woman’s smooth, white skin was smudged and dusty, and she wore a long, curly brown toop and a costume composed of two strategically placed plastic feathers. As Iron Man watched,

his interest rising, he couldn't help wondering if there had been three feathers before the tyrannosaur had struck.

The woman walked straight up to the Avengers, gesturing at the destruction behind her, her frowning mouth working up and down on what must have been the fortieth-century equivalent of chewing gum. "Awright, just what the flig's goin' on here?"

The Scarlet Witch smiled kindly. "Believe it or not, miss, a dinosaur just went on a rampage down this street."

"No kidding," the masseuse said matter-of-factly, placing her hands on her hips. "Look, sister, I got eyes. I can see what's shakin'. What I wanna know is *why.* I mean, the man said this wouldn't happen again. He promised. But just look at my shop. Do you realize what it'll cost to replace all that equipment? Why, the vario-vac alone could—"

"Say, is everyone okay?" The Beast loped onto the scene, followed in a more conventional manner by Captain America and Thor. When he saw the feather clad woman the others were talking to, he pulled up short and quite frankly stared. "Uh, let me rephase that: *wow!"*

The sultry masseuse was equally impressed, and her features visibly softened as she sauntered over and began curling her finger in the Beast's fur, leaning close against him. "Well, well," she cooed, "what have we here? I always did like a man with a strong toop fetish. My name's Queenie Dimm, big guy. What's yours?"

"The Beast."

"Ooooo."

Iron Man cleared his throat. "Um, excuse me, Ms. Dimm, but we have something of a problem here. And we think you might be able to help us, if you will."

"Yeah, sure. Be glad ta," Queenie said. Then, to the Beast, "Whatsay we have a little sit-down, huh, sweetie?"

“Anything you say, babe,” the Beast answered, immediately executing a triple handstand somersault that landed him butt-first on the fountain bench. He was rewarded by a squeal of pleasure from Queenie Dimm as she sat down on his lap.

Queenie then turned to Iron Man. “Okay, shiny-top, shoot.”

“You said something about ‘the man’ not allowing this destruction again,” the Armored Avenger began. “Could you tell us who that man is?”

“Well, Kang, of course. It was all on the news vids. You guys from outta town or somethin’?”

“You, ah, might say that. Would you mind explaining what Kang has to do with all this?”

“Sure. Why not?” Queenie Pimm adjusted her position on the Beast’s lap; the Beast swallowed. “It all started a coupla months ago. This Kang fella popped up on all the vid channels an’ said he was gonna take over the fortieth century. Not tomorrow, mind you, or a week from next Thursday, but the whole fliggin’ century! Naturally, everyone got a big laugh outta that. But then all these old-timey freakos started showin’ up. Y’know, dinosaurs, barbarians, an’ some big hunks with six-guns an’ floppy hats —I think they said they was the James Gang. Well, lemme tell ya, with all their wreckin’ an’ carryin’ on, they was ruinin’ business!

“So then Kang pulled another gig on the vid tube, this time sayin’ that he’d brought all those freakos from the past an’ that with his machines he could make ’em do anything he wanted. He said he’d have ’em squit the whole planet if we didn’t give in to his (how did he put it?) ‘benevolent rule.’ Well, to make a long story a little longer, things have been so peaceful in the Sol system lately that the Colonial Government’s army has shrunk down to a couple of armchair generals and a private who raises the flag in front

of the capitol building every day. So, since Earth is the system's favorite recreation spa and no one wants to lose it, we gave in."

"What?" Quicksilver interjected. "You gave up your world, your planetary system, your entire century of time and everyone in it? Without a *struggle?!"*

"Well, what'd you expect us to do, Slick? Throw soy bagels at dinosaurs? Let the thirty-ninth century worry about it, I say."

Iron Man started. "What's that about the thirty-ninth century?"

Queenie Dimm leaned her head down on the Beast's shoulder. "Oh, it's just that Kang was raving on the vid the night after he took over, saying that we were real smart to make his first step an easy one an' that he'd reward us with milk an' cookies or somethin'. Then he said he was gonna go back an' pull the same stunt in 3800 that he did here, an' that he was gonna do the same thing in every century until he was king of the whole megillah, whatever that means. Good riddance, I say."

The Avengers had grown somber—all but the Beast, who sported a silly grin. They now knew why Kang had been so generous in letting them leave. He had been afraid that they would discover his master plan and try to stop him. Then, when he had apparently decided not to take the chance that they already did know, he had plucked the tyrannosaur from out of time in an attempt to destroy them. The Avengers held no pretensions that the attack would stop there.

"Thank you, Ms. Dimm," Iron Man said, "you've been very helpful. And you can be even more so if you'll contact your 'vid channels' and have them warn everyone to stay inside for a while. In the meantime, Avengers, I think we'd best pay another visit to a certain demented time master."

The Beast looked anxious. “Uh, how’s about if you guys go on without me, huh? I’ll catch up in about ten minutes.” He watched Queenie readjusting one of her feathers. “Fifteen.”

“Now, Beast,” Iron Man said, turning to walk with the other Avengers toward a side street. The Beast sighed, lifted Queenie Dimm up and redeposited her on the bench, then bounded off to join his teammates.

“Oh, flig,” he said under his breath.

Fifteen

The Avengers didn’t look so tough when they were only six inches tall, Kang thought to himself. Then he reached to twist a knob on the control console, bringing the image of the seven heroes up to where it filled the entire twelve-inch height of the monitor screen before him. They were all standing at the edge of the cosmic moat that surrounded his citadel, and without exception they looked set, somber, and determined.

They knew.

Kang sat back in his chair—actually, he sat back on his golden force field, which sat back in his chair—and smirked. He hadn’t really expected that frumpy old dinosaur to stop his perennial foes, but he did hope sincerely that the monster’s sudden appearance had caused at least one of them to dampen his or her leotards. And judging from their expressions, he had certainly come close.

But even then, even after a display of the awesome forces at his command, they hadn’t learned. They had still returned to do battle. Oh, well, Kang thought as he readjusted a switch on the console and rested a hand on the

buttons at his belt, he hadn’t had a good play period in (snicker) ages!

“Then you’ve reconnoitered the area thoroughly? You’re sure there are no other entrances?” Captain America was looking across at the gray door that had been replaced in the wall of the glittering obelisk.

“That’s right, Cap,” Iron Man answered. “The Vision even checked out the possibility of coming up from below, but found that the moat goes on, literally, forever. We got in the first time by overcoming automatic defense mechanisms and smashing our way through the front door, but now that Kang knows we’re here, that could be a little dangerous to try again.”

“Aye. And thus the burden of gaining egress doth fall ’pon the shoulders of the son of Odin.” Thor squared those selfsame shoulders, placing his feet flat on the plastic pavement, a full yard apart. “Thou wouldst be well advised to stand thee back.”.

The other Avengers heeded Thor’s words, backing off to stand several paces behind the Norse deity. Thor then took a breath, concentrating, and pulled Mjolnir up and back over his helm, stretching until the stone head almost touched his back. And then he flung it forward, directly at the obelisk door, with all the strength his Asgardian muscles could muster—

In his subground headquarters, Kang sneered—“Cretin,”—and pushed a button.

—and the hammer disappeared. For an instant, Thor stood dumbfounded. And in that same instant the mystic Uru hammer reappeared directly behind him, making a muffled *paff* sound and continuing forward with all the speed and force the Thunder God had put into his throw. Before anyone could shout a warning, the hammer struck Thor directly

between the shoulder blades, causing his shoulders to arc back, his chest to jut forward and his eyes to spin upward in their sockets. The Asgardian swayed, as if indecisive, and then fell forward, hitting the pavement like a slab of dressed beef.

Watching on his monitor screen, Kang scoffed, “Take that!”

The remaining six heroes rushed to their fallen friend, their shock edging into fear. But their worries were somewhat allayed when both the Vision’s scanners and Iron Man’s sensors confirmed that Thor was alive, that he was in a deep state of unconsciousness but would recover in time. It was then that their fear turned to anger.

“Beast, bring Thor along.” Iron Man rose, looking at the obelisk. “We’re falling back.”

“Wha—you’re not serious?” exclaimed Quicksilver as the Beast hefted Thor’s body. “You can’t be serious! We can’t allow that miserable, time-hopping deviant to get away with this!”

“We’re not,” said Captain America as he followed Iron Man down the street. “I believe what Iron Man has in mind is more of a regrouping than a retreat. It’s good strategy.”

When they had moved several blocks away and turned a corner into another deserted side street, Iron Man directed the Beast to prop Thor’s body against a building. And then the Avengers gathered around to listen to their leader’s battle plan.

“I think it’s rather obvious,” Iron Man began, “that Kang’s ready for us. He knew that no power on Earth, including himself, could stand up against Thor for long. So he was canny enough to use Thor’s own strength against him, apparently creating a space warp and focusing one end of it in front of the obelisk to trap Mjolnir, then focusing the other end behind Thor so that the Thunder God would be struck

down by his own hammer. I believe that pretty much rules out our waltzing in the front door. Any suggestions, Cap?”

Captain America stood straight, his hand clasped behind his back just below the point where his shield was slung. “From what you’ve told me about Kang’s setup, Iron Man, I’d say that our greatest hope of success with the fewest casualties would be a division of our forces. So far as we know, Kang can’t watch all directions at once. So if we hit him from several points at the same time, there’s a chance that at least one of us could get through.”

“That sounds like solid logic to me, Cap. All right, then, with Thor out of the action, our best bet on breaking through the obelisk’s door is a dead-on repulsor blast. So I’ll go in last while, hopefully, Kang is busy with the rest of you. Wanda, there’s a possibility that one of your hexes could blast an opening if you can get close enough, so you’ll go in from the opposite side just before I do. Pietro, you go with Wanda.

“I’m afraid that leaves the rest of you as diversions. Vision, you go in from the left, in the air. Do what damage you can. Cap, Beast, you two take the ground route from the right and, well . . .”

“Don’t worry, Shellhead,” the Beast offered, “we’ll kick ’em in the shins and get their attention for you.”

“Thanks, Beast. Okay, Avengers, let’s do it. And good luck.”

Without another word, five superheroes dispersed in three directions, flying and running through the streets and alleyways of the plastic city. Iron Man watched them go, feeling a swell of pride at being the leader of such a noble band. Unfortunately, the noblest—and strongest—among them lay unconscious at his feet, and Iron Man regretted Thor’s incapacitation as much as he regretted not being able to leave someone behind to watch over him.

Then, shaking off all thoughts save those of the conflict ahead, the Golden Avenger took to the air, flying to the obelisk and to battle—and praying that they could confuse Kang long enough to fool him.

"So, they try to confuse me, do they?" Kang spoke aloud as he watched the Avengers approach his citadel on four separate monitors. "Those pompous meddlers forget that I am Kang the Conqueror! Master of Time! And soon I will show them that I am also the master of fate—*their* fate!"

Humming bemusedly to himself, Kang reached across the control console and adjusted a dial beneath a screen that showed the Vision flying through the city, and then pushed a button. He repeated the action with monitors that showed Captain America and the Beast, Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch, and finally, Iron Man. Then, finished with his preparations, he sat back, steepling his fingers and frowning with concern.

"I do hope they die well," he said, resting his nose on his index fingers. "I shall be very disappointed if they don't die well."

The Vision soared silently through the streets of the city. Many of the buildings he passed were empty, awaiting, perhaps, seasonal residents. Of those he passed that were tenanted, few of their occupants paid him any heed as he swept by. He was glad of that; the fewer distractions, the better.

He was a synthetic being, a polystyrene android with a computer mind. But that mind had been fashioned after the brain patterns of a human being, and those patterns gave him a desire for continued life as strong as that of any flesh-and-blood man. And so he strove to keep his mind alert, free of extraneous function. He thought not of the danger his wife would soon be facing. He thought not of the barbed

resentment her brother felt for him. Though the fact that such nonthinking was the result of a conscious effort did disturb him a little.

Thus it was that when his visual sensors spotted the slight blurring in the air in front of him, there was a microsecond's delay before he acknowledged the message his memory circuits were feeding him: the Beast's somewhat colorful description of this phenomenon was that the air turned "fuzzy" just before the tyrannosaur had appeared. Reaction relays then snapped shut, and the Vision banked left just as two gruesome shadows swooped from the blur, missing him by inches.

The Vision spun in midair, turning to see that the shadows were actually flying reptiles. *Pterodactyles,* his data core told him, *from the lower Jurassic period.* Kang had undoubtedly drawn the beasts from their home in the past and was, according to the pleasure agent at the fountain, controlling them with malevolent intent.

The pterosaurs had completed a wide, sweeping turn and were now gliding back toward the Vision on leathery, brownish-black wings. The solemn synthezoid had no doubt but that they meant to impale him on the jagged, bony sabers of their beaks. For the small, suppressed human corner of his psyche, that made the decision easier.

Wordlessly, the Vision waited, hovering in the air as the pterosaurs glided closer. Their wings, angled back to increase their speed, sounded like tattered leather sheets caught in a gale wind. Then, when he was certain that the reptiles were too near to change direction, he altered his density to the equivalent of hydrogen and rose swiftly some hundred feet. As the first of the flying lizards passed beneath, he altered his density once more, this time assuming the mass equivalent of lead, and fell straight down like a . . . lead android.

When he struck, the Vision snapped the pterodactyl's spine like a stalk of ripe celery, and then his plummeting body continued to carry the bowed-back corpse on down to the planet's surface. The impact was awesome, sending the Vision's feet shafting clean through the reptile's trunk and into the pavement below, literally nailing the creature to the street. As he stepped to stand beside the slowly-puddling remains, the Vision's fists were clenched at his side.

The second pterosaur had already turned, and was diving on a kamikaze course straight for the Vision, wings folded back flat against its torso. The synthezoid didn't move. The pterosaur fairly shrieked as it gathered speed, its beak a black rapier, pitted and deadly. The Vision still didn't move—but when the lethal reptile was mere inches away, he did shift his density to that of air.

Unable to even think of slowing down, the second pterodactyl shot through the immaterial Vision like a cannonball through whipped cream. Its beak struck first, jabbing into the plastic pavement and sticking, ripping off with a hollow crack as the bulk of its body went hurtling down the street. When the carcass finally landed, it bounced, and bounced again, spinning and tumbling like a hamstrung marionette, spattering nearby buildings with bits of bone and green-black gore.

The Vision stood where he was for a moment, not turning, not looking at the results of his successful strategem. Had he been human, he might have taken a long, deep breath. Instead, he subtly manipulated his density once more, rising to fly, perhaps a little too swiftly, on toward the glittering obelisk.

"Pity," said Kang, watching the Vision's departure on a monitor screen. "Perhaps I should have sent bats."

Several blocks after they had left Iron Man, Captain America and the Beast had turned right, heading off at an angle and

running for about a dozen more blocks before turning on an approach path that would bring them up to Kang's tower. Now, as that jutting gem-stone finger came into view, the two Avengers skulked slowly forward, their backs pressed flat against the buildings of the alley they were following.

"Hey, Cap," the Beast whispered, "do we really have to be this sneaky? I mean, I thought the whole idea was to make Kang notice us."

"Affirmative, Beast," Captain America whispered back, keeping his eyes on the obelisk plaza a block away. "But the closer we get before the enemy becomes aware of our presence, the more panic that presence is likely to cause. And therefore, the more disruptive our maneuver will be."

"You've got a point, Cap," the Beast said, no longer whispering. "There's just one hitch."

"Keep your voice down, Beast! What is it?"

The Beast stood up, looking into the sky in the direction from which they'd come. "It's just that I've got a sick feeling that the enemy became aware of our presence a long time ago. Like about . . . two thousand years!"

Neither of the two heroes had seen the air blurring high behind them, and only the Beast's animal senses had enabled him to hear the warning whine of engines in time. Now, as Captain America rose and faced the direction in which the Beast was looking, he heard the engines, too, and saw three sleek forms diving at them from out of the sun. And that sight sent an icy salamander slithering up and down his spine.

"Jets!" the Beast cried excitedly.

"More accurately, Beast," Cap replied, his voice disturbingly calm, "they're Me 262s." Captain America had good reason to recognize the aircraft; he had seen quite a number of them in those last years before he tumbled into the frigid waters off Newfoundland. He was more than

familiar with the smooth lines, the bullet-shaped nose, the tubular scoop-jet turbines under one wing. He was also more than passingly familiar with the precise, sharp-edged swastikas that adorned each side of the tail fin. Kang had chosen his black knights well, and Cap found himself struggling to choke down bitter memories.

That effort was made somewhat easier as the Messerschmitts opened fire, raking the street and building fronts with a rain of screaming lead, digging lines of jagged holes and sending scraps of multicolored plastic scattering in all directions. Captain America grabbed the Beast and pulled him into the recessed doorway of one of the ground-floor shops as the jet fighters shot by overhead, banking for a return strafing run.

“Sheesh!” sputtered the Beast, smoothing out his ruffled fur. “Why couldn’t Kang have stuck to big lizards? At least I can outrun them!”

“We’re sitting ducks, Beast.” Cap was peering out from under the doorway’s overhang. “And if we stay on the ground, we’re going to be nailed for sure.”

“Terrific. So how do we get *off* the ground? You got a spare 747 in your hip pocket?”

Cap turned back around, a dangerous grin on his face. “Not exactly. But I do have a plan.”

Less than a minute later, the jets had completed their approach run and were swooping low over the street, looking for their targets. But this time the two heroes didn’t hide—they stepped out directly in front of the speeding airplanes. As the Messerschmitts angled toward them, guns spitting fire, the Beast squatted down behind Captain America and grabbed hold of his ankles. Then, with a last farewell—“Cap, you’re crazy—but ya got guts!”—he lifted and flung the Star-Spangled Avenger high into the air.

As he flew, Captain America tilted himself forward and then pulled his knees up to his chest, rolling himself into a spinning sphere that carried him in a high curve over the approaching planes. When he reached the apex of that curve, he straightened his body, falling feet first to land in a crouch on the nose of the lead jet.

Inside the cockpit of that jet, the pilot stared. He had never even heard of the supersoldier serum, or of Steve Rogers. He only knew that he was cruising at a speed exceeding 500 mph and that a man in a red-white-and-blue uniform was crouching on the fuselage of his aircraft.

“Heilig düngen!” he said, and considered that a comparatively mild expression of his feelings in the matter.

Even with his superstrength, Captain America was having trouble keeping his balance on the speeding Messerschmitt. He had to get this over with quickly, he thought, and so brought his alloy shield around in a backhanded arc, ripping out the glass front of the cockpit canopy. He then reached in with his right hand, grabbed the pilot by the lapels of his flight jacket, and pulled him out through the opening, snapping safety straps and communications cables like bits of string.

For a frozen instant, Captain America held the terrified pilot before him, trying to quell ancient angers. The flyer was a Nazi; moreover, he had just tried to kill him and the Beast. But he was also a man. And so Cap pulled the pilot’s rip cord before tossing him, screaming, over the side and squirming into the cockpit himself.

The whole incident took only seconds, and so the speeding 262 had not yet deviated from its flight pattern. Captain America sat behind the controls, confidently. There wasn’t a plane, Allied or Axis, that he couldn’t fly as easily as riding a bicycle. He jammed the throttle forward to maximum thrust, pulling away from the two jets that followed, hoping that they hadn’t been close enough to see

him “requisition” their leader’s craft. Apparently they hadn’t, for as he banked sharply to the right, bringing his plane swiftly around onto a direct collision course with the others, his radio came alive.

“Heinz! Was ist verkehrt?” the auxiliary console speaker crackled.

“Why, nothing’s wrong, Fritz . . .” Cap answered, flipping up the safety guard over the button on his control stick, “ . . . now!” He thumbed the button, and the four 30mm cannons in the nose of his Messerschmitt chattered to life. In front of him, he saw tracers sketch a line to one of the oncoming planes, and then turn that plane into an exploding ball of shrapnel and flame. As he flew by, watching the fiery fuselage fall to the street below, he hoped that it wouldn’t strike a populated area. Too many casualties in any war were anything but warriors.

Executing a smooth, lateral curve as he rounded Kang’s plaza, Cap pointed his 262 back toward the aerial battleground, looking for the remaining enemy jet. Unfortunately, *it* found *him,* as cannonfire cut through the side of his plane, splitting fuel lines and just missing his neck and legs. The Hun was on his tail!

Shoving the control stick forward, Captain America sent his jet into a steep dive. As he’d hoped, the pursuing bogie followed. Then, when he was sure that the Nazi was closing for the kill, he yanked back on the stick, shooting up and over in a screaming backward loop that threatened to tear the wings off his plane. But when he leveled off, the enemy 262 was in his sights. He thumbed the trigger, his bird raked the Nazi jet with lead talons, and another ball of fire fell spiraling to earth.

Cap sat back, allowing himself a small smile of satisfaction. The old skills die hard, he thought. Unfortunately, the engines of his Messerschmitt chose that moment to putter and die instead. Startled, the Avenger

looked at his fuel gauge. The needle sat dead still on empty. As he struggled to keep his four-ton neo-glider in the air, Cap thought ironically that the Nazi pilot's skills weren't all that bad, either. And then he had another, even less pleasant thought: he had no parachute!

On the ground, the Beast saw what was happening, and felt about as useful as a fourth leg on a tripod. But he had to do *something!* He looked around, desperate, and then realized that the shop in whose doorway he had been standing was apparently a showroom for fortieth-century recreational vehicles. *Maronie's Skidders and Flitters,* the sign on the door said, *Everything for the Flying Hominid.* Through the window he could see several dozen vehicles, ranging from hover-bikes like Mauler's to what appeared to be multi-engined family vacation houses.

He tried the doorknob; it didn't turn. He tried smashing his foot against the door; it opened.

Inside, a thin man with a mustache toop stood behind the counter, waving a frightened hand. "We're closed! Kang's doing it again! Go away!"

"Hi," the Beast said, taking a seat on what looked disquietingly similar to a golf cart with an outboard jet on the back and rotary blades where its wheels should be. The vehicle had a steering wheel and pushbutton controls for up/down, forward/backward, and speed. The Beast pressed "up," "forward," and "fast" simultaneously.

" 'Bye," he said as he went crashing out of the shop's display window.

Once outside, the Beast found that his chosen rotary steed was more gainly than it appeared to be, handling not totally unlike the Avengers' jet hoppers he'd flown many times back in the twentieth century. And so he was able to quickly, if not with incredible grace, maneuver the flitter to a position slightly below the crippled Messerschmitt. Looking up and saluting, he called out, "Hey, soldier, need a lift?"

In the wind-battered cockpit of the jet, Captain America smiled with relief. Then, thinking to possibly turn defeat into renewed offense, he motioned for the Beast to follow and angled the stubborn control stick down and to the right. When the pointed nose of the ’Schmitt was aimed directly at the front edifice of Kang’s towering citadel, he locked the ailerons, jettisoned the canopy, and jumped from the cockpit. Holding his shield over his head with both hands, he was able to control his speed and angle well enough so that he landed on the back of the Beast’s flying golf cart with less than bone-breaking impact.

The Beast was about to make a “welcome aboard” statement when the flitter was rocked by an explosion. When he had steadied the vehicle, both he and Captain America watched as the crumpled, blackened remains of the last Me 262 skidded down the face of Kang’s obelisk and into the waiting chasm of the cosmic moat. The obelisk itself was unscratched.

“Blast!” said Captain America.

“Damn!” said Kang, switching off a second monitor. “Good help *is* so hard to find these days. Or any other days, apparently . . .”

“There they be, as we were told! Purify the witch first! Then we’ll cleanse her silver-haired familiar!”

The blurring in the air had occurred half a block away on a connecting side street, and so had completely escaped the attention of the softly stepping Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch. They had seen neither the blurring nor the dozen or so strangely costumed men who had walked from it. Hadn’t seen, that is, until they had rounded a corner and found those selfsame men blocking the path between them and the rear of Kang’s citadel.

The men wore black long coats with wide collars and cuffs, black pants, and black ankle boots with large gold buckles. Around their waists were equipment belts from which dangled various weapons and tools, and on their heads they wore black-plastic helmets with visors. Some of them carried riflelike devices with nozzle-tipped barrels. In short, they looked like a perverted hybrid of Plymouth Rock Pilgrims and the New York Highway Patrol.

“Stay thee still, Satanspawn!” their leader continued. “Neither thy beguiling form nor thy undoubted wiles shall forestall thy expurgation!”

Wanda Frank was leery, and a little confused. “Now wait a minute,” she said. “We don’t want any trouble. We have nothing against you. We didn’t even—”

“—expect us?” the leader sneered. “Of course you didn’t, foolish woman. *No one* expects Saint Alphonso’s Conscience Police!”

“Conscience Police!” Wanda said, more to herself than Pietro. “But those were the fanatical agents of the Purists that the Vision told us about.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Pietro remembered. “The ones who hunted . . .”

Brother and sister thought the same thought, turned to look at one another, and spoke that thought: “Witches!”

Instinctively, Wanda cast a protective hex sphere around herself, and just in time. The lead fanatic and several of his followers raised their rifle weapons and liquid fire shot from the nozzles in thin, strong streams. Quickly, the Scarlet Witch cast a second protective shield to guard Pietro, but she needn’t have bothered. Quicksilver wasn’t at his best when running backward, but he had nevertheless managed to be seventeen blocks to the rear when the first drop of shooting flame landed on the spot where he had been standing a second before.

Turning her full attention to the attackers, the witch was pleased to see that the napalmlike ammunition they were using was splattering wildly when it struck the hex sphere, some of it even splashing back at the Conscience Police, scattering them over the intersection. (She was also pleased to see that the streets and buildings were unaffected by the flames—plastics technology, it seemed, had come quite a ways in the last two thousand years.)

Hoping to end the confrontation quickly, she brought her hands up, gestured, and cast a hex to make the internal workings of her assailants' weapons fuse together. Without weapons, she postulated, they would be no more harmful that the soapbox revisionists in Times Square. But the Conscience Police kept shooting.

The Scarlet Witch was puzzled; perhaps the weapons had no moving parts? Clearing her head and changing her stance within the hex sphere, she drew on her mutant abilities, alerting the probabilities of the street beneath the fanatics' feet, thinking to trap them in the same way as she had the runaway crane in Bantu Junction. This time the spell worked and the plastic pavement liquified—only the religion police didn't sink.

The Scarlet Witch's hopes did, however, when she realized what must be happening. With the aid of modern science, these future witch hunters must have created electronic deflector devices, sort of like occult body armor, to protect themselves from hexes and spells, both natural and synthetic. They couldn't get to her, but she couldn't get to them, either. Stalemate.

Meanwhile, Quicksilver circled around and approached the overzealous peace officers from behind. He wasn't running at top speed because the fanatics' backs were to him and he was counting heavily on the element of surprise. Unfortunately, it was *he* who got the surprise as a third eye

popped open in the back of one of the CPs' heads and a voice called out, "Jedediah! Behind us! Use the high beam!"

Regrettably, Quicksilver wasn't aware that at one point in its history, mankind had perfected the science of genetic manipulation. He didn't know that people had been bred with special characteristics and additions to carry out specific functions. He didn't even know that all of the CPs, including the one who, with a third hand, raised a wicked-looking ray pistol from beneath the back of his long coat and shot him, were just such creations. And after the ray blast struck, he didn't know much of anything.

It was as if someone had crammed a half bushel of downers directly into his brain. Buildings wept, the sky melted, and the street tilted in every direction but the one in which he wanted to go. He stumbled, staggering sideways, seeing everything as if in slow motion. He saw that he was lurching toward one of the bonfirelike masses of errant napalm, tried to regain his balance, couldn't—and then he found that he did know something, after all. He knew that he was going to die.

That belief was confirmed when he saw the ghost stepping through the fire. The ghost grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him sideways—at least it seemed like sideways—so that he fell unburned to the pavement nearby. That was an odd action for a spirit, he thought. Perhaps this was a friendly ghost? He thought of the name "Casper," and giggled.

The Vision, now solidified, knelt down beside the lolling Quicksilver. His scanners had already analyzed the cause of the speedster's incoherence and so he placed one finger at a point on Pietro's neck, another at the base of his spine, and applied measured pressure for precisely seven seconds. When he removed his fingers, Quicksilver was once more lucid—and amazed.

“You . . . you saved my life!” he stammered. “But why? After all that’s been said? After all I—”

The Vision rose to his feet, speaking calmly. “Wanda loves you very much. If you were to die, she would be hurt deeply. And despite your refusal to understand, my most fervent desire is to keep Wanda from pain. In that respect, Pietro, you and I—man and machine—are the same.”

As if satisfied that the matter was closed, the Vision sank down transparently into the pavement, and in seconds was gone. Quicksilver stood, thinking for a moment, and then the crackle of flames reminded him that danger still existed, both for himself and for his sister.

It didn’t exist for long. Sprinting at top speed, so fast that he couldn’t be seen no matter *how* many eyes an observer had, Quicksilver whirled through the battle-torn intersection, slamming his rock-hard fists into a dozen unprotected jaws. The last of the Conscience Police was unconscious before the first had struck the ground.

Quicksilver stood panting, as if he had released more than anger in that brief second of violence. He looked to where he had left his sister, and saw that the hex sphere had been dissolved, that Wanda and the Vision stood close, hands touching, speaking silent reassurances with their eyes. He wanted to feel resentment, indignation, disgust—but all he felt was hollow.

In his vast, air-cooled control room, Kang smashed a force-field fist into a third monitor screen, and glowered.

Iron Man had been hearing the sounds of fighting for some time, and so wasn’t terribly surprised when his peripheral sensors indicated that he was being paced on either side and from above and below. The pacers had appeared instantly, and so he could only assume that Kang’s time

grabber had sent them—and that his and Cap's ploy had failed.

He glanced to one side, and immediately christened the pacing craft "Skorpions." They weren't extremely large, no bigger than Russian M-21 fighters, but they looked mean as hell. They were constructed of something that resembled bright-red, segmented metal. They were roughly rocket shaped and they were apparently powered by glowing, globe-shaped pods that were attached to stubby wings on either side. The cockpit area was a semi-translucent bubble on the underside of the fuselage, and though Iron Man couldn't tell exactly what the pilots looked like, he did detect the movement of what appeared to be tentacles (and guessed that these were participants from some alien invasion in Earth's recent past).

But what really set the craft off was its tail assembly. Sprouting from where a tail fin would be on a conventional airplane was a long, tapering section of metal that curved back over the craft's body like a scorpion's tail. And, like its arachnid counterpart, that tail was tipped with an extremely lethal-looking stinger.

As he watched, Iron Man saw the stinger on the Skorpion to his left swivel around to face him and, before he could take evasive action, it let loose a bolt of bluish energy that caught him in the ribs just above his left storage pod. The Avenger's armor absorbed most of the bolt's energy, but the unexpected impact rolled him over in a three-quarter turn. As he stabilized, he snapped off a quick repulsor blast from his left palm, was gratified to see it sheer the entire tail-and-stinger assembly from the offending Skorpion, and then kicked in his jet boosters and shot forward in a blur of red and gold.

As he spun to face the remaining Skorpions, Iron Man noted that the disabled craft was crash-landing in an area of plastic hills and streams below, and was glad that any

debris from what could be a very messy battle would be falling on an empty park.

The three alien ships had formed a wide phalanx as they dove at him, catching the Armored Avenger in scintillating energy blasts from three separate angles. But Iron Man was prepared for the charges this time and stood firm, hovering in the air and rocking only slightly when the blue bolts struck. As they drew close, the Skorpions broke formation to avoid a collision, one climbing to fly over Iron Man, the others banking off to the sides. But when the center Skorpion flew overhead, Iron Man shot upward, reaching out a gauntleted hand to grab the ship's nose and stop it, instantly, in midflight. The ship stopped, but the pilot didn't. Iron Man heard a pulpy, squishing sound, and saw that the underside cockpit was filled with liquid.

Clearing his mind, the Golden Avenger whirled, digging his hand deep into the fabric of the Skorpion's fuselage. He located one of the other alien craft halfway through a loop that would bring it back for another blasting run, mentally calculated an intersecting trajectory, and heaved the pilotless Skorpion forward like a great crimson javelin. When the two spaceships hit, the sky sparked white with an explosion that left pieces no bigger than baseballs to rain down on the deserted park below.

Now it was one-on-one. The last Skorpion had obviously realized this, as well as realizing that alone it had no chance of succeeding where four of its kind had failed. No chance of succeeding, that is, *and* surviving. The final alien spacecraft rocketed forward, straight at Iron Man, a fortieth century Divine Wind.

Iron Man waited, hovering silently, feeling not unlike the frontier marshal in a Hollywood western, awaiting high noon. The Skorpion bore down; Iron Man tensed, clenching his fists. The Skorpion reached peak speed, its engine

whining shrilly as it overheated; Iron Man cocked back his right fist.

Then, when the alien ship was inches from collision, the Golden Avenger shot his fist forward, slamming it into the Skorpion's nose with an impact that would split a skyscraper. The center of the streamlined craft stayed where it was, crumpled into a foot-thick mass at the end of Iron Man's fist. The rest of the ship went flying past on either side, straight at first, and then erratically, finally losing momentum and falling down to the plastic hillsides like limp litter.

Iron Man gently pried the smoking, greasy center of the Skorpion from his gauntlet, let it drop, and stood breathing deeply in an empty sky.

Rising from his chair at the control console, Kang stabbed a button and sent the fourth monitor screen into darkness. He knew that he could send more time-stolen menaces at the Avengers, but he also knew that they would probably be defeated as definitively as had the others. No, those superpowered busybodies were going to have to be taught a permanent lesson. And the only one who could effectively do that . . . was *himself!*

Sixteen

Captain America, Quicksilver, the Vision, the Scarlet Witch, and the Beast stood in Kang's courtyard, at the end opposite the obelisk. They were not pleased. They had succeeded in surviving everything Kang had thrown at them, but that survival was their only prize. They were no closer to their ultimate goal than they had been when they had started. As they waited for word from their leader, they felt tired, and uncomfortably restless.

The Beast stood balanced on one hand, as if his upside-down perspective could give him new insight into the situation. "Too bad Thor's still zonked. What do you think the chances are that he might come to before Kang sends some more of his nasties after us?"

"I don't know, Beast," Cap said.

The Vision spoke in sensible tones. "I would calculate the odds to be 4,693.7 to—wait!" He turned to look down the street behind them. "There!"

All of the Avengers turned, but none could identify the thing they saw flying down the street at great speed, about

ten feet above the surface, on a direct path toward them. They couldn't even name it "Skorpion," since only a jagged opening remained where the stinger like tail assembly had once rested. All they saw was a crimson, segmented dart with stubby wings.

But Kang, watching on a reactivated forward monitor, recognized the craft for what it was, and was delighted. Then, however, he was puzzled. How could the mechanism fly without a tail assembly? And hadn't he seen Iron Man destroy *all* of the alien spaceships?

Outside, the Avengers tensed, Captain America raising his shield and the Scarlet Witch preparing to cast a protective hex sphere around them all. But then Cap saw something behind the dark ship and held up a restraining hand. "Wait a minute! It's one of ours!"

The other Avengers held fast, obeying Cap's command even though it went against their instincts for self-preservation. But then the crimson craft streaked by overhead, and they understood.

Deep within his control center, Kang saw the time-lost Skorpion speeding straight toward his glittering citadel, and also understood. He reached for the controls of his time-warp projector, growling like a kicked animal, but was too late. He could only watch as twin repulsor beams shot from the rear of the approaching ship, and then fight to keep his balance as the entire building rocked, its new gray door shattered like dropped porcelain.

Above the courtyard, Iron Man let go of the crippled Skorpion he had been pushing in front of him and let it fall, skidding, over the edge of the cosmic moat into infinity. It had served its camouflage purpose well, allowing him to get close enough to blast an entrance in Kang's fortress. He now flew through that entrance, settling to his feet in the silent hall of clocks. He was soon joined by the Vision, who carried Quicksilver and the Beast, one under each arm. The

synthezoid then made a second trip, returning in seconds with the final two Avengers.

“I’m sure you realize,” Iron Man began, “that if we don’t stop Kang now, we might as well just bend over and kiss our aspirations good-bye. Because if we fail, the whole of history will belong to a madman.”

There were no comments.

“All right, then,” Iron Man picked up. “Vision, you take Cap and Pietro down through the hole Thor made. I’ll blast a second opening here and drop down with Wanda and the Beast. Maybe if we hit Kang from two sides we can catch him by surprise. Okay, let’s do it!”

Iron Man waited until his three teammates were positioned around the existing break in the hall’s floor, then aimed a repulsor at a spot on the carpet before him and blasted. Without checking to see if the others followed suit—without needing to—he dropped swiftly down through the hole he had made into the chamber below.

Kang was waiting for them. He had assumed a tall, steady stance, one hand on his control buckle, feet far apart on the raised dais of the central control console. His golden aura throbbed, and his ivory-white teeth were a marked contrast to the matte blue of his mask as he hissed, *“Diiieeee!”*

It was not a time for amenities. Iron Man raised both hands and loosed a double repulsor burst straight at Kang. But Kang wasn’t there when the burst arrived, and the repulsor energy succeeded only in carving a crackling hole in a far corner of the room.

“Excellent marksmanship, Iron Man.” The Avengers turned to see that Kang was now standing behind them, smiling jovially. “Perhaps later we can find some broad sides of barns for you to shoot.” The smile flipped into a scowl. “Fools! With my undisputed mastery of dimensional technology—”

He disappeared.

“—I can be anywhere I want!” Kang had reappeared on the control dais. “And when I combine that with my mastery of time itself,” he reached back to manipulate some control dials, “I can create other rather . . . *amusing* diversions!”

Captain America had been edging slowly around the dais. Now he sprang at the time master from behind—and landed on the back of a creature that was half man, half ape. To the Avengers in the control room, it looked as if Cap had vanished into thin air. To Captain America, it seemed as though someone had changed channels when he wasn’t looking. He found himself on a rocky ledge before a cave stuck like a thumb gouge in a desolate landscape. The ape-man he had struck was getting up, showing broken yellow teeth as he snarled. Apparently, his dozen or so friends who poured from the cave entrance weren’t too choked up about the invasion of their territory, either; their wood and stone clubs were poised to strike. Captain America hefted his shield, took a step backward—and was back in the control room.

“As you can see,” Kang purred, “it is but a simple matter for me to create space-time warps of any size, and in any place, that I choose. In seconds, I shall pepper this entire chamber with invisible doorways, any one of which could sell death or eternal wandering for anyone unfortunate enough to make a misstep. And I shall be the only one who knows where they are! The game begins, Avengers,” Kang swung around and swiftly set dials on the control console, then ran his fingers over the buttons at his belt. “Catch me if you can!”

The Vision’s left side disappeared. He looked to his left and saw a green, hilly countryside. In the far distance was a lofty castle topped with stone battlements and flapping pennants. In the near distance were a horse-mounted knight and squire who were plainly scared spitless.

“Zounds!” cried the knight. “ ’Tis magic work! Camelot doth be attacked by the powers of darkness!” He spurred his steed and charged toward the half android as his squire beckoned him back, calling, “Sir Percival, don’t! ’Tis naught but a vision!”

As the knight neared the half-visible synthezoid, he lowered his visor and his lance. The Vision calmly altered his density so that the charging horseman passed through him, through the space-time warp, and into the control room of Kang the Conqueror.

“By Arthur’s codpiece!” he sputtered in amazement. “What manner of sorcery is this?”

All around the huge auditorium, similar confusion reigned. The Scarlet Witch leaped out of empty air, followed by a band of Spartan gladiators who had likely not seen a woman, let alone a clean one, in months. She turned their swords and tridents into balsa, and directed their nets to wrap around them, penning them at least temporarily. Any scholar of Spartan slang would have killed to hear the aftermath.

Captain America was busy fending off the angered ape-men who had pursued him through the initial warp, and Quicksilver was wending his way around the room at little more than a trot, disappearing and then popping back as he tried to piece together a path to the control console, fearful of using his great speed lest he plunge so deep into another era that he might never be able to find his way back.

And all the while Kang chortled, cackled, and sniggered with glee.

The Beast had been at the side of the room when the space-time warps had been summoned. Since then he had been moving along the wall, examining the banks of equipment there as if looking to buy. He paid little attention to what was going on around him until, in rounding a corner, his foot went through an invisible warp and into a primordial

swamp of the upper Cretaceous period. He removed his foot and shook it, referring grumblingly to the slimy residue there as being similar to what the army serves on a shingle. And then, carefully skirting the see-through warp, he continued his slow examination.

Iron Man fumed. The Avengers were being made fools of, and no one did that. *No one!* If he couldn't stop Kang, he thought, then perhaps he could at least stop the humiliation that lunatic was causing. There was one chance. Since the warps had occurred only after Kang had set dials on his control console, he reasoned, the sustenance of those warps was likely dependent upon power sources other than Kang himself.

Thus the Armored Avenger raised his gauntleted hands once more, this time spacing them a yard apart before he triggered his repulsors. As he had anticipated, one of the repulsor beams faded a few feet from its target, lost to be interpreted, perhaps, as a sign from God in some ancient time. But the second repulsor blast got through the invisible mine field, striking the control console with a sizzling crack. Iron Man looked around, hopeful—but nothing had changed.

On the dais, Kang feigned graciousness as he bowed from the waist. "Oh, thank you, kind sir. I assure you that my machinery is in no danger of running down, but your kind gesture was most appreciated, nevertheless." He raised his head, still bowing, and his masked lips curved upward in a grin that would sour honey. "You *did* know that all of my mechanisms were designed to absorb and utilize any energy that is directed at them . . . didn't you?"

Beneath his armor, Tony Stark seethed. If this maniac's machines were impervious to energy, then by God he'd see what a determined *physical* assault would do! Fists clenched before him. Iron Man stepped forward—and by his third step was surrounded by furious battle. The warriors that clashed all about him were clad in bamboo armor and swung

straight-bladed swords with frightening expertise. “Samurais,” he thought, just before he was struck from behind and went tumbling beneath the hooves of a banner-draped horse. As he rose and braced for further attack, he wondered if the warrior who had struck him was puzzled at the dent in his blade. Not that it really mattered, Iron Man thought; he was as good as dead anyway. Because as he glanced around, through the bedlam and cacophony of the battlefield, he realized that he had no idea at all where the time-space doorway was.

Meanwhile, back in the control room, the Beast was leaning forward, hands clasped behind his back, peering at a particular arrangement of dials and switches so closely that his nose almost touched them. In his concentration, he didn’t see Kang pop into existence next to him, and so started when the time master spoke.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“You weren’t going to touch anything here, were you?”

“Uh, no.”

“Good. Because if you did touch something, I’m afraid that I would be forced to dismember you in a rather foul fashion. And I would prefer to avoid that. I like you.” Kang patted the Beast on the head, like a favored puppy. “You’re blue.”

Kang touched a button on his belt, popped out and reappeared on the control dais. The Beast let out a long, low sigh through fluttering lips and turned back to the machinery bank.

At that moment in the seventeenth century, the Avengers’ leader was ducking under an incredibly swift sword swing and wondering if he could ever get used to raw squid for breakfast. He cocked back a fist to deck his attacker, but

stopped when he heard an amplified voice booming over the din of battle.

“Iron Man! Here!”

Iron Man looked around, and was never happier to see a red-skinned synthezoid in all his life. The Vision stood on a rise nearby, one leg unseen as he used it to mark the warp gate. Suddenly, a samurai lunged forward at the Vision, shouting “Aaiieee!” The Vision calmly caught the man’s sword, gave it a sharp twist and snapped the blade cleanly in two. When the warrior ran off, his “Aaiieee!” had an entirely different tone.

Iron Man kicked in his boot jets and followed the Vision gratefully through the space-time warp back into Kang’s lair.

The situation had worsened in his absence. The entire building-sized control room was filled with chaos. Everywhere he looked, men, women, and animals popped in and out of sight, passing from one time period to another. Pirates, spacemen, cowboys and Indians, post-catastrophe scavengers, and Spanish conquistadores. Mixing, fighting, screaming, and crying, they came and went in patternless confusion. The world was nightmare; the world was Kang’s. Someone *had* to do something, thought Iron Man.

And someone did.

In a far corner, the Beast nodded his head once, extended a furry finger, and flipped a nondescript toggle. The results were, more or less, spectacular. As one, each of the time-displaced creatures in the room began to shrink, collapsing in on itself like the image on an old-fashioned television screen when the power is turned off. In seconds, the room was empty, save for seven greatly-relieved superheroes and one unabashedly stupefied Kang.

“Wh-What—?” he stuttered. “Who—how—?”

The Beast came bounding up to perch on the front edge of Kang’s control panel, where he squatted, one toe idly

bothering a knurled knob, and grinned from ear to ear. “I cannot tell a lie, flippo. It was me.”

“You?”

“That’s right. You see, before I got saddled with my current hirsuite gestalt, I was a pretty good dabbler in the ol’ science game. And I remembered that back then, whenever we started a crucial experiment or project, we always made sure to set up a safety system to negate the ongoing reactions in case anything started to take an unfortunate turn. And I figured that even being a twist, you weren’t stupid, so probably had a similar emergency setup here.

“It took me awhile to figure out your gizmos—fortieth-century science is just a *shade* above my level—but once I doped out the basics, it wasn’t all that tough to find your reversal switch over there in the corner. If I’m not too far off, I think it not only canceled out the space-time warps, but sensed the temporal oscillations that were out of synch because of those canceled functions and sent everyone who had stumbled in here back to their own times. Am I right?”

“You are disgusting,” Kang sneered. “But I am not beaten yet. I still have my force field, and my self-sufficient time powers!”

“Oh, sure,” the Beast replied. “But you don’t think I’m going to let you *use* them, do you?”

Half of Kang’s mouth curled into a contemptuous leer. “And just how do you propose to stop me?”

“Easy. You of all people should know that one of a scientist’s basic tools is observation. So I watched real carefully when you were setting the controls to call up those space-time warps. And unless I’m real mistaken, or a little clumsy, my foot digit here has just focused one of those warps on you!”

For the first time, Kang noticed the toe that had been playing so innocently with the knob on the control board while they talked. His eyes widened perceptibly.

“Oh, and did I forget to mention,” the Beast asked pleasantly, “that I turned off the emergency-reversal switch? I’m really very efficient, you know.”

Kang’s hand darted for the control buckle on his belt, desperate to warp himself out of the way. But his human speed was no match for the animal-like fleetness of the Beast as a fur-covered hand slammed down on the control panel, pushing seventeen different buttons at once.

Kang gasped, and split apart. Like a giant jigsaw puzzle, pieces of his body began disappearing, some slow, some fast; seventeen self-contained sections going off to seventeen separate points in space and time. The last piece to go was Kang’s mouth, and as it faded away into forever, it whispered, “Never . . . trust . . . blue!”

The other five Avengers, having watched in silence the incredible scene that had occurred before them, now moved forward. They walked slowly at first, as if still fearful of stepping off into some miscellaneous century, and then faster as they realized that the dimensional doorways were really, truly gone.

“That was fantastic, Beast!” Iron Man slapped a hand on the Beast’s shoulder.

“Exemplary, Beast,” Cap added, offering his hand.

Wanda leaned over and gave her blue teammate a kiss. “You were wonderful, Hank! I still can’t believe it! I didn’t think we’d *ever* get rid of Kang!”

The Beast exhaled on his fingernails and rubbed them on his furry chest. “Aw, ’tweren’t nothin’. I knew we’d beat Kang all along.”

“You did?”

“Sure,” Hank McCoy examined his freshly buffed fingernails. “It was just a matter of time.”

The groans that followed were inevitable.

Epilogue

The day was still pleasant, and the shoppers and pleasure-seekers had resumed their leisurely strolls down the main street of the plastic city. They paid little or no attention to the maintenance crews who were cleaning up after the recent destruction and, as before, they treated the seven superheroes standing in their midst with an equal lack of interest.

“I cannot help but wonder,” Quicksilver said musingly, “if we might not have been better off saving our energies. Is a future like this, where nothing is more important than cultural inertia and personal amusement, really worth saving?”

The Vision, standing next to him, answered, “There is a theory that suggests an infinite variety of futures. Perhaps, if mankind awakens to the true values it has so long ignored, this particular future may yet be avoided. We can strive for that, and we can hope.”

Iron Man stood with Thor, gazing down the length of pink, shiny pavement. “Are you sure you’re all right, big fella?”

“Aye,” the Thunder God replied, his smile warmer than the afternoon sun, and nearly as wide. “For in sooth, the sole discomfort I yet feel doth be my lingering chagrin at not being able to aid thee in thy recent near-mortal combat.”

“Don’t worry about it, buddy. The next psychotic time thief we run into is all yours!”

Iron Man took one long, last look at the future city-scape, and then motioned to the others. “All right, folks, gather ’round. It’s time to go.”

As before, six Avengers—Iron Man, Captain America, Quicksilver, the Scarlet Witch, the Vision, and the Beast—stood in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, their backs to Thor in the center. As the Thunder God raised his mystic hammer and began to whirl it in a circle over his head, the Beast turned to Captain America.

“Hey, Cap, you want first dibs on the jacuzzi when we get back? I mean, what with you being frozen in that pseudo-ice for so long . . .”

“Thanks, Beast,” the Captain answered, “but you go ahead. I think I’m going to be staying in Bantu Junction for a few days, anyway. There’s a man there, who went through a lot of hell because he thought I was a god, and he’s probably going through a lot more because he found out I’m not. Maybe I can make it a little easier for him.”

As Thor’s hammer spun faster and faster, and the forms of the seven superheroes began to waver and dim, Iron Man felt a warming swell of pride for a second time that day. And then Mjolnir pulled them through the portals of time, closing the door with a gentle pop of displaced air.

The Avengers were going home.